Plenary Address for *Caritas et Veritas and the Examined Life*

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*Taking stock and being “true to the heart’s one choice”:*

*a meditation in three movements*

At birth, my parents named me Christian Andrew Rohman. And this is the name which appears on my birth certificate and driver’s license. When I was younger, my oldest sister thought it was funny to call me “kitchen an-dew,” and she thought it even funnier to yell “kitchen an-dew!” at the top of her lungs from our back porch when my mother ordered her to call home my brothers, sisters, and me after a day’s worth of adventures in the neighborhood.

On those quiet summer nights I would cringe as I heard my misappropriated name echoing through the trees from blocks away.

Soon after my birth, however, and apparently out of a concern that my boyhood friends and teachers would inevitably truncate my name and simply call me “Chris,” my parents preemptively renamed me Chad; it’s a long story, but my father had found the name in a Henry James novel and liked it. (If you’re interested, the novel is titled *The Ambassadors*.)

Now, however, the only people who know me as Christian, besides my family (and, now, all of *you*), are the people who work either for the TSA or the DMV.

So, for as long as I can remember, I have signed my name “Chad”—and for as long as I can remember, I have wondered who Chad is and who Christian may have become.
First Movement: Studying Mark Twain/Studying Life

In the summer of 1998, I earned my Ph.D. and began my life (again) as a professor of English. That spring while finishing my dissertation I had the great fortune of living and working for two months as a research fellow at Mark Twain’s summer home in Elmira, New York, called Quarry Farm. My wife and oldest daughter, then 3, joined me.

As its name implies, the farm—now only a stately Victorian farmhouse and humble red barn perched upon East Hill in Elmira—sits on the site of an old quarry. Back in its heyday it was a working dairy farm. In the later 1800s the farm was given by way of inheritance to Twain’s wife’s adopted sister, Susan Crane.

Susan loved Mark Twain dearly and nicknamed her farmhouse “go as you please” hall.

Twain and his family took full advantage of the farm, living there as regular summer guests from April to October between the mid 1870s to the early 1890s.

In 1874, it was Susan Crane who gave Twain and American literature the great gift of Twain’s now-famous octagonal study, his private writing office—a room of his own located just above Quarry Farm on a rise to the north, providing Twain with unobstructed views of and inspiration from the countryside below.

It was in this study where Twain wrote some of most famous works and created some of his most memorable characters, including Tom and Huck.

While at the farm that spring, my family and I took Susan’s words to heart—and we went as we pleased.

In the mornings, I did my writing and read books in the Twain family library while my wife and daughter explored the farm.

In the afternoons, I did research or played hooky and dozed in the farm’s hammock or walked its back hills with my wife and daughter.
In the evenings, we sat with the ghosts of Mark Twain and his family in the rockers on the front porch, while my young daughter rode her tricycle back and forth on the porch’s wooden floor.

It was on this same front porch to which Twain would return each evening after a day’s writing and read his works in progress to his family.

Often, he would purposely include “stretchers” and silly situations among his characters’ actions—literary foolishness deliberately intended to amuse his three young daughters and unsettle his wife, Livy, who was always his best editor.

During my stay at the farm I also spent a lot of time in the Twain Archives located at Elmira College. […]

...And it was here at the archives that I made a profound discovery, one that had nothing to do with Mark Twain.

In the mid 1990s, the archives received the notes and papers of a now-deceased and highly respected Twain scholar named John S. Tuckey.

Although he died in 1987, when I was just completing my Master’s Degree, Professor Tuckey and I had become intellectual soul mates, since he and I were both interested in the late-life works of Mark Twain; it is these works which include some of Twain’s most deeply complex philosophical inquiries about life and truth.

For over two decades before his death, Tuckey had been working on a massive life’s work on Twain, which he had tentatively titled, Mark Twain: An Interpretation.

Sadly, the work remained unfinished at his untimely death.

When I arrived that spring, Tuckey’s notes were still sitting in boxes on the archive’s floor awaiting filing. There must have been almost two dozen boxes. The archivist, Mark Woodhouse, invited me to use these notes, as I wished.
So, again, I went as I pleased, rummaging through the boxes before me, as well as all the archives had to offer, including scores and scores of letters from Mark Twain to his family and various associates, all written in Twain’s own handwriting.

Of course, I greedily devoured Twain’s handwritten letters, but as I pored over the Tuckey files, I felt a mixed sensation of excitement and guilt. What would Professor Tuckey think? Was I a “publishing scoundrel,” to use the words of Henry James’s famous female protagonist, Juliana, in *The Aspern Papers*. Would I, a fellow Twain scholar, approve of such an act of literary voyeurism?

Despite my reservations, I spent two or three afternoons rummaging through the Tuckey files, and it was late one afternoon when I discovered something stuffed deep within these old folders—something that to this day still affects me.

No, it wasn’t a Scarlet A.

It was instead a note written by Professor Tuckey in pencil on faded yellow notebook paper, with the words “Taking Stock” scrawled at the top.

Written below that phrase was the scholar’s self-made checklist—of things done, of things to do, of things not to do, of things to think about further both professionally and personally.

As a young scholar, husband, and father I was struck by the note, this apparent message in a bottle, what appeared to me then (as it does now still) as one colleague’s personal and private act of totaling a life’s work.

I found the note to be inexplicably sublime and moving—this dead letter, once lost among dozens of files, was now alive in my hands and head.

Even now, I remain moved by its unintended significance to me—and, I think, to us.

In effect, Professor Tuckey was asking life’s *most important guiding questions*:
Who am I? Who will I be in the world? What does it mean to live mindfully and reflectively? What part does making a living play in making a life? How is a life to be lived? What does a life of study and contemplation total? Is what I’m doing purposeful and fulfilling—does it matter? Do I love it? Am I doing what I ought? Am I being true to myself? To others? For whom and for what am I accountable? In what do I believe and why?

I paused...reflected...and then I laughed—for at the bottom of the page, Professor Tuckey’s note went from the sublime to the mundane by his writing, “time to replace aging sump pump.” (All homeowners can relate.)

As a young scholar and father I came away from that afternoon’s experience anxious and somewhat unraveled.

Where and/or when I would stop and “take stock”? When would I total it all, and would I be happy with the bottom line? Will there be time, and will there be time, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock.

Yes, will there be time in a world pressed by war, waste, hostility, hatred, injustice, distraction, desire, and want—will there be time to become a loving self, a truthful self—and what does that self look like, after all.

There will be time, I believe—and that time begins now. In a world so precariously positioned, we cannot wait.

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But just what will I (we) become—and how to proceed?

John Neafsey writes in the introductory chapter to his 2006 book, A Sacred Voice is Calling, that we must find a “proper balance between inward listening to our hearts and outward, socially engaged listening, with our hearts to the realities of the world in which we live” (1).
We must, I believe, each take stock of our own callings, inwardly and outwardly, in this regard, and do what we must—do what we can, given our various workloads, duties, and daily obligations.

One of my favorite riffs on Thoreau’s most famous work, *Walden*, comes from the writer E.B. White.

In a sly commentary on the paradise of bachelors that Thoreau affords himself at Walden Pond—the time and space to think, meditate, write, and contemplate—White, a father, takes the liberty of revising Thoreau’s famous frugality and independence; among the price of wood, nails, and supplies that Thoreau meticulously and rather boastfully itemizes in his ironically titled chapter, “Economy,” White, in his own version of *Walden*, adds two more essential items: “.25 cents for a bat, and $1.25 for a baseball glove.”

Thoreau never knew of such fatherly (or motherly) obligations, of course.

**Second Movement: Love and Truth—**

*How do I get here from there?*

Our motto, *Caritas et Veritas*, aligns compassion with truth—I like to say it this way: *love truth*. Pursue it, in fact, as our mission statement commands.

One thing I also love is the campus in the late afternoons, between the midday rush of classes and the impending deluge of evening commuters. By then, the email torrent has dwindled to a manageable trickle and Grand Central Station, also known as Lewis Hall third floor, has become serenely quiet—if only for awhile.

In the later afternoons I often move myself away from my computer and to a large table in my office and examine the day’s work—perhaps do my own work for a change. Sometimes, I chat with my very wise officemate or eavesdrop on one of her regular student-teacher conferences: (“No, the word is not ‘disinterested,’ it’s ‘uninterested,’” I hear her say kindly but adamantly to her doting student.)
More often, however, I work quietly and in between my grading and reading, I daydream.

While I sit there mixing pleasure with pain, I realize that I love what I do—and that I am lucky in that way: lucky to have been born and raised by loving parents; lucky to have received a quality education; lucky to have been soaked from my youth in a faith tradition; lucky to be a husband and father; and lucky to be a professor of English in a place like Dominican and to be among colleagues who also believe that the terms “Caritas” and “Veritas” are not just still-life artifacts in a college catalog but living, breathing things.

In May, over thirty of us gathered at the Sinsinawa Mound, Dominican’s Motherhouse, for a retreat on Contemplating Life’s Callings. It was a memorable week.

As I told that group on the last day, the only way I can adequately describe my retreat experience to others is to say that I spent four days alone in the company of friends.

I encourage other faculty and staff to go and do this—and next May you will have your chance.

While we were there, we talked about calling, vocation, and contemplation, and we practiced being mindful and contemplative through various speaking, listening, and meditative exercises. On occasion, we would stand as one and sing.

But above all, we listened—to each other, to ourselves, to the Word, and to a mindfulness chime that beckoned us to quiet ourselves and sink deeply into the moment.

One afternoon, we visited the Mound’s Heritage Floor and together viewed exhibits on Father Samuel and the Dominican Order.

As I viewed the many artifacts and pictures that day, I was taken by a shared sense of calling, for in the eyes of the young Dominican sisters I saw courage, compassion, wisdom, and humility.

Above all, I saw love.
Third Movement: living the examined life while doing

the work at our heart’s core?

When words fail me, I rely on experts and friends, both living and dead. I have Mark Twain on speed-dial, of course. And Thoreau is another friendly ghost who continually reminds me to live life deliberately and with attention to that which matters.

In his chapter titled “Reading” in *Walden*, Thoreau reminds us about the power of words and the importance of the potential for transcendence in all that we do and touch; he writes, “There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us…”.

And then there is my other good friend, contemporary American writer and poet, Wendell Berry.

In his collection of poems titled *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*, Berry reminds us that often it is the small moments which are the most significant in our lives and the lives of others—and that life remains a mystery.

Describing one such small moment with his aging father, he writes the following poem, dated 1993.

Now that my own father is 85, I find Berry’s poem meaningful on many levels. I hope you will, too.

So it is with Berry’s poem that I will end my reflection this morning.

But before I read it, I sincerely invite you to immerse yourself fully in this year’s *Caritas Veritas* symposium as we pursue the truth together.

And here is the poem:
When my father was an old man,
past eighty years, we sat together
on the porch in silence
in the dark. Finally, he said,
“Well, I have had a wonderful life,”
adding after a long pause, “and I had nothing
to do with it!” We were silent
for a while again. And then, I asked,
“Well, do you believe in the
‘informed decision’?”
He thought some more, and at last said
out of the darkness: “Naw!”

He was right, for when we choose
the way by which our only life
is lived, we choose and do not know
what we have chosen, for this
is the heart’s choice, not the mind’s;
to be true to the heart’s one choice
is the long labor of the mind.

He chose, imperfectly as we must,
the rule of love, and learned

through years of light what darkly

he had chosen: his life, his place,

our place, our lives. And now comes

one he chose, but will not see:

Emily Rose, born May 2, 1993.

Thank you and have a wonderful day at the symposium.