

Finding the words

By Mary L. Dudziak

On a hot July morning, outside a chapel perched high on a cliff above Lake Como, I sat in the shade with pen and paper in hand. I wrote about an American lawyer and his encounter with Africa. My table outside the chapel was far from the locales that figured in my history, but it seemed as if the words had been there, on that mountainside, waiting for me. I did not think of the phrases; I simply tried to keep up with them. After an hour of hurrying my pen, this moment in a longer story was completed, and just in time. The sun had reduced the shade to a sliver. It was time for the hike and the ferry home.

My home for a month was a villa in Bellagio. This small town in northern Italy is best known as a beautiful resort, and more recently as the namesake for a Las

Vegas casino. It is also the home of an extraordinary institution, the Rockefeller Foundation's Villa Serbelloni, where a small, international group of scholars and artists live and work for four weeks at a time. I had been told it would be heavenly. Most luxurious, however, was not the spectacular view from my terrace, but the expanse of time. Isolated from the pressures of daily life, I could carry a narrative passage to its conclusion before turning to anything else. I could mull over a problem for hours or for days until a

solution came along. I could pick up a pen when the words appeared out of nowhere and needed a scribe.

Sometimes I think that the best writing isn't consciously imagined. There is the research, of course, which is carefully planned. But then, after the primary sources have been scoured, and a narrative emerges, if a writer is very lucky, and perhaps very quiet, the words appear on their own.



I can remember, when I look at my writing, those moments and those places when an avalanche of words appeared, sometimes unexpectedly. It could be on a cool afternoon, in front of a fire, while nursing a sick friend asleep in another room. Or while watching, on television, the children in the heart wrenching ceremony commemorating the first anniversary of 9/11. It could be in the shower, or while falling asleep, or while out for a walk. It does not happen, unfortunately, in the crush of daily life, with one eye on

the computer and another on the clock, hoping to miss the evening rush-hour traffic. The great value of Villa Serbelloni was its vast separation, not only geographic, from everyday life. The isolation would be tiring after a while, but for four weeks it is glorious.

The trail to the San Martino chapel is steep but well marked. I met few hikers, although it was a Saturday. At the base of the trail, one cowbell marks the path of the only cow at a small family farm. Along the way are weather-beaten religious shrines, some decorated with wilted flowers and burned-out candles. Near the top is a memorial to local soldiers killed in wars. On the walls of the war memorial are paintings of soldiers trekking up a mountainside in a blizzard. In this space, on this trail, mourners sought words of comfort. Just once I entered this space of cherished memories. Perhaps it is a territory of ideas, which fashion themselves to each sojourner, as they need them.

Professor Mary Dudziak was in residence for four weeks during the summer of 2004 at the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy. She worked on a new manuscript, "Exporting American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall and the Constitution of Kenya," which details for the first time Marshall's work with Kenyan nationalists during negotiations with the British government on an independence constitution in 1960.