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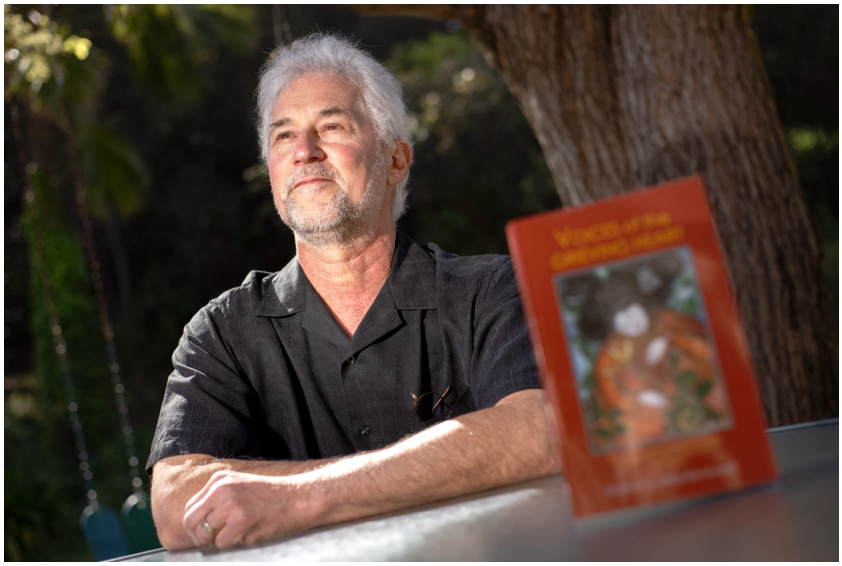
Moraga poet's 'Voices of the Grieving Heart' explores loss, pandemic grief



MORAGA, CA – APRIL 9: Mike Bernhardt poses for a photograph in Moraga, Calif., on Friday, April 9, 2021. Bernhardt republished his 1994 anthology of poetry about grief featuring various poets called "Voices of the Grieving Heart" just in time for April's National Poetry Month. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)

By JESSICA YADEGARAN |
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PUBLISHED: April 12, 2021 at 8:45 a.m. | UPDATED: April 12, 2021 at 9:38 a.m.

In 1991, following the sudden death of his first wife, Susan, Mike Bernhardt began writing poetry as a way to deal with his grief.

In the poem “Sunday,” he writes, “Together, we survived the terrifying night/of CPR and defibrillation, too many tubes and wires and doctors/my kisses on your forehead and your eyes kissing me back.”

Poetry became his medicine. He found its immediacy — penning sorrow to paper and reading poems by other people about mourning and transformation — more healing than how-to books.

“I didn’t want to be taught about grief,” says Bernhardt, 64, of Moraga. “I wanted to feel, to have my own experience validated in the words of other people.”

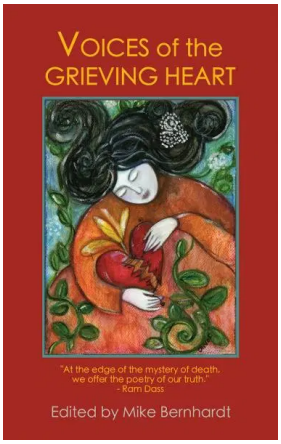
That healing power has resonated in this year of collective mourning. Poetry has taken center stage as a form of meaningful entertainment — inauguration poet Amanda Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb” and Diane Frank’s “Fog and Light: San Francisco through the Eyes of the Poets Who Live Here” are topping Amazon and New York Times best-seller lists, and Gorman performed at the Super Bowl, an event not normally associated with verse. But poetry has also been a potent salve for the soul and spiritual guide in these uncertain times.

The expanded second edition of Bernhardt’s just-published anthology, “Voices of the Grieving Heart” (Cypress Point Press, $17), includes an entire chapter on pandemic grief written by a wide swath of people, from a former social worker to a doctor grappling with the trauma he has seen, and prompts for readers to add their own poetry.

The book, which is available through Book Passage and other booksellers, contains more than 160 poems, essays and images by 83 contributors, including 20 from California. Its chapters are organized by the path of grieving, moving from the shock of “Someone Died Today” to the agony in “The Raging Storm” to a sense of calm in “Begin to Heal” and “The Breath of Great Spirit.”

John Fox, the founder of the Mountain View-based Institute for Poetic Medicine who wrote the book's foreword, calls the curation of these new poems "a necessary, bold act."

"Using your own words as a tool of healing is like an immune system response. People need this work, especially right now," says Fox, whose nonprofit helps fund poetry-writing programs for the incarcerated, refugee and immigrant youth, and people living with traumatic brain injuries. Proceeds from "Voices of the Grieving Heart" will benefit the institute.



"Voices of the Grieving Heart"

Bernhardt, who remarried 28 years ago, retired from a career in IT in 2016 to pursue travel writing, but he always hoped to republish the book someday to honor Susan's memory. When COVID-19 hit and travel adventures were put on hold, his wife Yvonne convinced him this was the time. A new call for submissions brought hundreds of poems from as far away as India and Australia.

"It's almost like a support group in a box," Bernhardt says. "This book is 83 people asking the questions, 'Who am I now?' 'How do I go on?' It leaves readers to find themselves in those questions and maybe come up with their own answers."

Los Angeles poet Sam Ambler's "But You Elude Me" is about the possessions our loved ones leave behind. In "Reunion," Carlin Holden of San Francisco writes about the presence of the deceased in our dreams.

In Mara Teitel Sheade's "Your Ring" (For Alan, 1953-1989)," the 59-year-old Fremont poet speaks to her dead brother about wearing his gold ring: "Maybe it doesn't have a memory of you/its metal never bent to the shape of your finger/But my flesh connected to your metal/fills the hole you left behind." Sheade wrote about her brother's death in the first "Voices." "Your Ring" is a new poem written only a few months ago.

“One of the reasons I keep writing may be because I keep trying to bear that witness, trying to grasp what happened that night (he died),” she says. Over the years, the former social worker has used her skills to help others express their grief, leading poetry workshops in schools, libraries and senior centers.

And in the “Pandemic” section of “Voices,” 17 poems explore everything from virtual funerals to the kidney doctor haunted by the memory of sending a COVID-19 patient home to recover in isolation: “Unseen, lungs full of spikes/Primed for a siege.”

Chike Nzerue found it cathartic to write, the Las Vegas doctor says via email, “The twines of contrition surround me, like an anaconda, in that poem.”

He hopes the poem helps fellow physicians heal from seeing so much death and feeling so helpless and vulnerable.

“I hope,” he says, “it also shines some light on the burden of doctors bearing witness to the last moments of life.”

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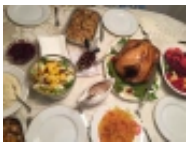

Jessica Yadegaran | Eat Drink Play writer and editor

Jessica Yadegaran is a writer and editor for the Bay Area News Group's Eat Drink Play section, which is devoted to all things food, wine, cocktails, and travel. She also spent two years in the Pacific Northwest as the food and dining editor for Seattle magazine. Yadegaran has a degree in journalism from San Diego State University and has been with the Bay Area News Group for more than 10 years.

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