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THE BIG PONDER

Adventure

By Susanne Papawassiliu

Mike Powers: Art is something that you must absolutely have to do, as opposed to something that you just merely can do. And for me, art is like a silkworm spinning its thread. It comes out of the very center of his being. Art is the same with me, and I think it has to be like that. It can't be something that you do on the periphery. You have to come out of the center of you. And if it's not doing that, it's gonna show in the work.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Says Mike Powers, 50 years old. He's a good-looking, tall guy, wavy semi-short hair, dressed casually in jeans and t-shirt. Ten years ago, he left Boynton, Florida, and moved to Berlin. Not knowing anybody here, nor speaking any German. The need to express himself – through his art – and the desire for an extreme experience, fueled his decision to take the liberty and leave his life in the construction rental business behind – a life of pools, everlasting summer, and financial safety – to start a journey that you could very well call an adventure.

Mike Powers: It wasn't like a quick thought that came to me all of a sudden. I think I started having these little Germanic thoughts long ago. You know, I would read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. And doing that, and you know, my grandmother is German. So, kind of that influence. And, you know, I'd listen to Bach, Beethoven. And so, the German culture always had a hold on me. I don't think the decision was 100 percent conscious. I think it was kind of subconscious, too. It's like I had an inner compass, kind of like when a turtle's hatched in the beach – like a loggerhead turtle. It knows instinctively to go into the water because its inner compass tells it not to go along the beach or toward land. It instinctively goes into the water. So with me, I think that, for a long time, my inner compass was magnetized toward Germany.

Susanne Papawassiliu: We meet at the Boules courts in Kreuzberg near the Landwehr Canal, one of the many waterways in Berlin and at the Charlottenburg Palace, a baroque palace with a lavish garden. Like so many spots in Berlin, they both have become very familiar for Mike over the last ten years. Berlin is a place he calls home, far away from Boynton Beach, his other home – a city of approximately 68,000 in Palm Beach County, Florida. First, I thought, ah, just another expat who lives a carefree lifestyle in Berlin as so many have in the past – treating Berlin almost like a theme park, a luxury few can afford. Pursuing the fantasy of a bohemian lifestyle in one the few places where this was – and may still be –

possible. But Mike's story differs. He is an artist with no trust fund or sponsor to finance his life in Berlin. Nor does he have a job here. Is it possible that in this day and age a guy who's been dealing with heavy machinery most of his life pursues his dream, follows his inner compass, and leaps without a safety net? To be an artist without necessarily dreaming of becoming famous. Nor to establish a steady income with his art. In a way, sort of thumbing his nose at the American Dream.

Mike Powers: I think the American Dream is to make a lot of money and to get rich quick or something like that. I think that's the official American Dream. But the other American Dream, I think, is to leave America and go to Europe or somewhere else and live however, that bohemian lifestyle or to have a lot of money when you do it. I mean, I have just enough money when I'm here to get by, and that's perfectly fine with me. I got in my business in 1995. I rented out construction equipment. So, when I first got in the business, you know, I wasn't thinking about Germany at all. And in fact, I didn't have any ideas about being a writer at that time either. I think I started the business, and like a month or two after I was in it, I started writing. And so, I was 24 at the time, and I think kind of my escape was to write. With poetry, for instance, if you were to look at a lot of my poems, they're kind of abstract. They're not something that you can like bring up in everyday conversation. You know, you just can't throw that out there. But it satisfies me, it satisfies something in me that just needs to be or it expresses something that I need to express. I have this great need to go beyond what can be said in everyday conversation and in art. And also, you can kind of prune your words in poetry and in prose, too. I could say something ten times, and it won't come out the way I want it to. But if I sit over a piece of paper or the typewriter or the computer or whatever and write it, I can put it down exactly as I feel it. Or I can get pretty close anyway, much closer than I could by trying to voice it.

[MIKE READS HIS POEM "TRANSFORMATIONS" ALOUD]

In those days, things kept dying around me.
A nightingale's song fell down in the brambles.
A white-faced possum groped in through
The cat door one night, very late, found a quiet corner
In the kitchen, lay down and went upward

Into the light, circling. A circle of light came down.
And the stain in the terrazzo floor became a mirage.
A nightingale's song tangled up in the brambles.
And then it was summer, and I was waking up
In all these different beds, in all these magnificent

European cities, without you. I can't even
Remember our last hours together, or saying
Goodbye. But in those days, as the husk was
Peeling, a halo of honeybees swarmed my head,
And the light kept going out of me.

A nightingale's song lay dead in the brambles.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Prose, poetry, writing – much more than a pastime for Mike.

Mike Powers: Yeah, yeah. I think I needed an escape from the tool rental shop, and my customers, they were blue-collar construction workers, kind of the salt of the earth. You know, you wouldn't talk about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with these guys. You know, poetry wasn't really a subject that was brought up at all. But it's kind of like my little, the place that I went mentally after being abused at the shop all day and talking construction equipment and being like obsessed with money all day long. Then, I would go home and read Schopenhauer, read poetry, read Nietzsche or Goethe, and write. And it was like just my little place to escape, I guess you could say.

Susanne Papawassiliu: A need for escape that eventually led him to leap over the big pond. After a few of years of trying to do both – work and write – it turned out that this couldn't ever be enough.

Mike Powers: So at that point, I started saving up all the money that I made, and I'm not a big spender in the first place, so it was easy. Everything that I earned. I just paid my bills. Everything extra just went into my savings account. So, I saved and saved and saved. And finally, five years later, I got to the point where I felt like I had, you know, two years' worth of money to – I could live, you know, pretty nice in Germany for two years. So, I did that and came over here. And there's always new worries. You know, you think you're going to go to a new place, and it's going to be all freedom and roses and everything like that. But, you know, it comes with an equal amount of little hindrances and worries and new little challenges. If I never came over here, I would have felt guilty. I would have felt like I never did anything in life.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Mike could have decided to move to any other big city in the U.S. and that might very well have been easier for him, but he knew it had to be more extreme than that to make it count for himself, thus: Germany. Berlin. Goethe played its part in this decision, too.

Mike Powers: I've been reading Goethe for years, different books. *Faust* was one of my favorites. *Conversations with Eckermann* was also a favorite book of mine, which was just Goethe

talking about all these different subjects, and then, the Italian journey or the Italian *Reise* was probably my favorite part of his life where he just kind of left Weimar in the middle of the night, didn't really tell anyone, and went to Italy for, I think, two years total he was there. And although that wasn't really what I was thinking of when I moved here, it was similar to what I – what I wanted was a couple of years here and just to be bashed with a different culture and – like he was with Italy. And for him, it was a really transformative period on several different levels, not only artistic but even sexually. And, you know, the environment in Italy, the people are much different than Germans. And so, it was kind of, for him, a metamorphosis. And I was hoping for the same kind of metamorphosis here, coming here. I came here at about the same age. He went to Italy at 37. I came here at 39. And the difference is: He came back in two years, and I'm still here ten years later.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Goethe as an influencer for an adventure. Not one to climb dangerous and high mountains but the mountain within. To grow as a person and an artist.

Mike Powers: I'd been in a shop for 16 years straight. My shop had bars on the front windows. In a way, it was like being in a jail for 16 years, although it wasn't all bad. It was, I had a lot of fun, a lot of fun experiences at my shop, but, you know, I felt very restrained there. So when I came here, it was like throwing all that off, throwing off all the chains, and finally being able to do what I want with a ton of free time. Never had that before. And devoting myself to the arts and throwing myself out of my comfort zone. And now, being able to see Florida through a different lens, that would've never happened if I hadn't come over here and also being able to see America through a different lens. There's things that I know and realize about Americans that I never would have known if I hadn't gone away.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Like what?

Mike Powers: Like just all the little idiosyncrasies, all the little things that make Americans who they are when you've only lived an experience that you can't really see them from a proper distance or through the perspective of a European. Europeans see Americans much differently than Americans see themselves. Americans seem to be much more into appearances, into being defined by what they have as opposed to who they are. I think that's not only an American thing, but it's more prevalent in America than it is here, I think. And that really kind of stood out to me after I came over here more than anything else, I would say.

[MIKE READS HIS POEM "JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT" ALOUD]

With a bottle of Belgian beer,
I stand among pigeon feathers

and a choir of darkening leaves,
the murky *Landwehrkanal*
traveling under my feet, choppy
ripples painted with amber
horns and a blotch of floating swan.
I watch it pass into the mists. I watch
the clouds devour a Ferris wheel
and a flying purple goose.
I watch the remaining
fragments of the sun fade as night
comes and places a shadow
on me. I am not supposed to be
here. Something happened.
I am standing on the wrong
continent. I have strayed into
the wrong myth. Yet here I am,
half-drunk, heart torn by butterflies
and maenads,
by the glittering pallet knife
of some mad expressionist painter.
In a word, by love. I sit listening
to carnival music
ambling over the waters.

Yeah, the first few months, I felt kind of ... I broke up with my girlfriend just before I moved over here, and we had been together for 11 years. So, that gave me a feeling of emptiness too because I didn't have, I felt like – I was like almost desperate for someone to fill the hole that she left. So, there was that. There was the hole that not working left. And then, also add to that the fact that I didn't have any friends at first. So, I had no one to share my experiences, which, I was doing a lot of amazing things. I was going to museums, touring all the cities. I was doing a little bit of traveling then, but I was all by myself. And I love solitude, but, you know, sometimes solitude can be a little overwhelming. And so, that's how it was at first. You know, that's the thing that I eventually got used to it, and I eventually met people. And I think it took about three months until I had a little group of friends, drinking friends, that I'd hang out with. And after that, you know, I almost had to fight to get my solitude back.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Some could say Mike leads a bohemian lifestyle. Let's get into that: What – or who – is a bohemian? The word stems from the French 'bohème' and emerged in the early 19th century

when artists and creators began to concentrate in the poor Romani neighborhoods. 'Bohémien' was a common term for the Romani people of France who were mistakenly thought to have reached France in the 15th century via Bohemia, a region that now is part of the Czech Republic. Today, we may consider Bohemians as people who practice an unconventional lifestyle with no structure nor worries about the next day. Whereas Mike's life is surprisingly structured, due probably to the other big influencer – next to Goethe: the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who lived in the 18th century.

Mike Powers: I bought a book of his essays, and in the beginning of the book, in the intro, they talk about his daily life. And I think what he would do was, when he was living in Frankfurt, he had the same routine every day for 27 years or something like that. And that was: He would wake up in the morning, drink a strong cup of coffee, and he would write all day. He would write until lunch, and then, he'd go to the Englischer Hof. I don't know if this order is right, but he would go to the Englischer Hof in Frankfurt, have a nice lunch, and then, he'd come home, play the flute – which he was actually, I heard he was really good at – and then, he would maybe read for a couple hours, and then, he would go out on his daily walk, which was two hours every day, rain or shine. He would go out and do his walk. Then, he would come home and maybe have dinner. And that night, he would go to a show somewhere. And he did that for 27 years straight. So, I wanted to kind of experience something similar.

Susanne Papawassiliu: How would you compare your lifestyle, your structure of a day, to Schopenhauer's now?

Mike Powers: it's pretty similar in that I wake up early like him. I do my writing or my art in the morning, then I'll have a light lunch or whatever, and I'll do a little more in the afternoon. I always go out for my walk, but I think I was, I'm not really thinking of him when I do it. I think that's just something that just feels right for me. And I just, I need structure, too. I have a very structured life just like that. There's not that much variation. I think just like you have to give structure to art, you have to give structure to your life. And so, if you have a bohemian or adventurous lifestyle, you know, one bohemian moment after another, one adventure after another, it's kind of senseless unless you have the structure or the form or the ritual, which brings it all together.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Two years into this new and fairly carefree life in Berlin dedicated to his personal freedom and artistic expression, came the unexpected – another adventure: a child.

Mike Powers: Probably the first weekend when I found out that I was going to be having a son, I felt like, oh, here was another prison or something like that. But I got over that pretty quickly. It was unbelievable how quickly my attitude toward that changed. But I, you know, I didn't want a kid ever in my life. I don't think. And then, you know, within the first weekend, my thinking

about that totally flip-flopped. And then, you know, I started seeing all the positive things about it. And then, maybe something biological took over, too, that I can't even define. But it also tied me to Berlin more than it ever would've. And I wanted to be tied to Berlin, so that was also a positive thing. And then, it was an experience that I think I needed that I never would have known I needed by bringing him into the world.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Balancing life with a child in Berlin, Alfie, who mainly lives at his mother's and his new girlfriend, Heather, while living a free life dedicated to the arts. Here and there, a job as a movie extra is all Mike does in terms of paid work in Berlin. To finance this lifestyle, he regularly goes back to Boynton, Florida, to his other life. Working in the very place he escaped from, the construction tool rental shop. It is also a chance to be with his parents.

Mike Powers: One thing that I would say is kinda tough – it's been tough for me – is: every time I go back to the States, I'm older, but my parents are also older and growing more obviously feeble. And my mom now has Lewy bodies dementia, so when I go back to Florida, one of the things that I'm going to be doing is I'm going to be taking care of her a little bit and, you know, cooking all the meals and stuff like that. And so, I saw her kind of slow deterioration with this over the last like five years. I saw it slowly come on. And then every time I went back, it was just a little worse. And now it's to the point where she, it's hard for her to even speak. Yeah, that is just something that I've learned to deal with. And it's been very difficult, but yeah, just seeing them slowly go downhill every time I go back has been pretty difficult. But if I were there, it wouldn't be any easier, really. I don't think so.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Are you ever torn to make a decision of living just here or just there? Are you ever torn between these two places?

Mike Powers: Not yet. I mean, this is always going to be my priority because he's here., And Heather, she's got a job here, so she's totally settled here. And so, I don't think – right now, I'm not torn. But, you know, maybe if my brother sells the business, and then, I don't have that anymore. Then, I would have to figure out whether I wanna, you know, get a job here of some sort, start a business or, you know, I don't think I'd go back there. I think I'd just be here and kind of live hand-to-mouth for a while until I figure out what I want to do. But no – right now, I'm enjoying living kind of the best of both worlds.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Living in both worlds made it also possible for him to experience new talents within.

Mike Powers: Well, I knew I was an artistic type. I just didn't know I could draw or paint when I was there. And I actually didn't know that until I moved here till I was, I guess 44. And Heather, my girlfriend, came home one day with two pencils and a couple of pieces of paper and an

eraser, something that anyone has around the house. Before that whenever I tried to draw, it was always with a pen, just doodling and messing around. And I'd just draw something, and it wasn't very good. And then, I tried with a pencil, and I was like: I'm really going to like, really try to draw something cool. And I think the first thing I drew was Socrates' face. One of the things that he said was: know thyself – or I think he said that, I think he was the one who said that, but I put the quote right next to his face. As I was drawing his face, I was like, wait a second, this is actually kind of good. It's not horrible anyway. And so, if I really practice, maybe the next thing I draw will be a little better. So then, I took a picture of someone and took a picture of a lady sitting in front of a wall. And I drew that, and I was like, that's pretty good, too. Strange. I can actually draw. And so, I think the next day, I went outside, and I was looking at the buildings and the canal and I was like, oh my God, this is a revelation! I never knew I could draw, and now, I like have to draw all this stuff. So then, I started drawing, and eventually, I became as obsessed with that as I am with writing. So now, I have both things. I have writing and drawing. I think I have this desire or this need to make more of everything that I see. So, I see it as like kind of a dictionary. It's words. It's a tree over there. It's really nothing until it's transferred into art, and then, it becomes something more. So when I walk around the city, I look at the lake, I look at the bridges, the buildings, and they don't really mean much to me until I turn it into art. And then, it becomes like certified, I guess you could say.

Susanne Papawassiliu: Is it like an enhancement?

Mike Powers: Yeah, yeah. I think – I wrote one of the things that I said, somewhere in one of my poems – is that Berlin is a beautiful woman that I'm trying to embrace. But every time I think I've got her, she disappears. So, that's how I feel. I see – I, you know, you walk around, and you see the way the light plays on the water or you see the way the light falls on people or leaves in the trees. And you want to go into that, and you want to like really grasp it and maybe even die in it. But you can't do that. So, you have to make more of it and in making more of it, for me – or to capture it, I guess you could say – for me, it's getting it down on paper and whether it's through writing or drawing or whatever it is. And then, I feel like I have something. So, that's that need I always have.

Susanne Papawassiliu: In a world where money means a lot to most people, this is a unique lifestyle Mike has chosen. A proverb says: rich is not who has the most, rich is one who needs the least. In terms of money or the accumulation of things, this is true for Mike. He's rich because he took the liberty to follow his dream. His lifestyle is more or less accepted by Heather, the British girlfriend he is about to marry soon.

Mike Powers: She wakes up at 6 every day. She's off to work by 7. And when she leaves to go to work, I'm usually awake, wide awake but lying in bed still. And sometimes when she comes home, I'm in the exact same place. And I don't think she's too happy about that when she sees that, especially when the house isn't totally picked up and cleaned. So, but what she doesn't see is that between the two lying-in-bed periods, I have been out. I've gone for my two-hour walk. I've written a poem. I've written a short story or drawn something. I've done a lot in the artistic realm. But yeah, I mean, the fact that it's not bringing in an income isn't her favorite thing.

Susanne Papawassiliu: But overall, she accepts that you live this lifestyle.

Mike Powers: She's been accepting of it ever since – it's been like this since we met. And, I think she's accepted that there's not many changes coming on the horizon.

Susanne Papawassiliu: A life dedicated to the arts. Mike followed his dream or his inner compass. While some may not even have a dream, many of those who do may not dare to actually pursue it. For Mike, it was a compelling call to an adventure he could not resist. A much needed adventure – to be continued.

Mike Powers: I'm always wondering what's next, but I am definitely not bored. It's just a matter of ... Right now, the big question is: how do I synthesize my art, my drawing, my painting, and my writing, and where do I go with that, exactly? But this is something that I'll do until I die, I think. I will never quit. I have to have an artistic outlet. And so, no matter what the results are, whether I make money with it or not, I create art for art's sake. And I will continue to do that. I don't see myself ever stopping. I may not write for a couple of months, but while I'm not writing for a couple of months, I'll be drawing and painting and vice versa.

Susanne Papawassiliu: That was Mike Powers in this podcast episode for THE BIG PONDER, produced by Susanne Papawassiliu from Berlin.

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