



**WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE:
WHY WRITING STILL MATTERS
IN THE AGE OF AI**

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR

Because of my work as a writer and editor, I'm sometimes asked to visit life writing groups – regular gatherings of people who write not because they have to but because they want to. Such groups typically include doctors and teachers, engineers and lawyers, civil servants and business executives, many of them retired.

The members often craft and share stories drawn closely from their experiences, which is what life writing is supposed to be about. Beyond these bits of memoir, some life writers create a fair number of poems, essays, and perhaps a bit of fiction, too.

I've been thinking about my life writer friends this year as much of the world has a public discussion about the rise of artificial intelligence programs such as ChatGPT that handle a number of writing tasks. If a machine can do the work for you, why bother to sharpen your skills with the written word?

I'm not against technology that can help writers clarify their thoughts and correct grammar and spelling. It's important to remember, though, that writing is about more than telling others what you think. It's also a vital way to tell *you* what you think. Writing, like painting, music, or any other art, is a path to self-discovery, a way for us to learn more about who we really are.

I felt vivid grief when my mother died, but writing about it helped me see more clearly the depth of my loss. Writing about the joys and challenges of marriage and parenthood has deepened those experiences for me, too.

When I was a child, cheap, powerful, and portable calculators arrived on the market, prompting predictions that in this brave new world, no one would bother to learn math for themselves. Decades later, ambitious students still learn how to work with numbers, though digital technology makes many things simpler. They learn math because it empowers them to think creatively about the universe.

AI tools offer lots of shortcuts for writers, but that doesn't mean the craft of writing is obsolete. Writing is another way to grasp the world, as journalist and author Anna Quindlen points out in her recent book, *Write for Your Life*. She includes a quote from novelist Flannery O'Connor that I treasure: "I have to write to discover what I am doing."

Quindlen wrote her book for those she calls "civilians" – people who don't write for a living, though they can benefit from exploring their inner lives through language.

"Tell your story, record your thoughts, note your feelings, write it down," she urges readers. I love that advice, which any life writer should keep close to heart.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university

students.