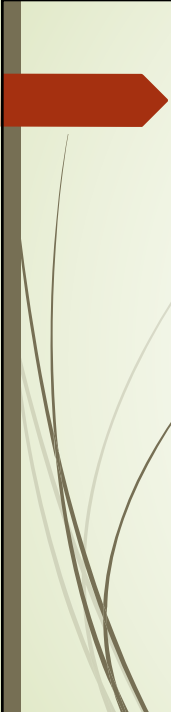


# *Writing Our Lives*

*with Andrea (Andy) Gilats*

Transforming our memories into  
engaging, meaningful life stories.

1



Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?

You are an adult. The old one, the wise one. Stop thinking about saving your face. Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world.

Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize Lecture, 1993

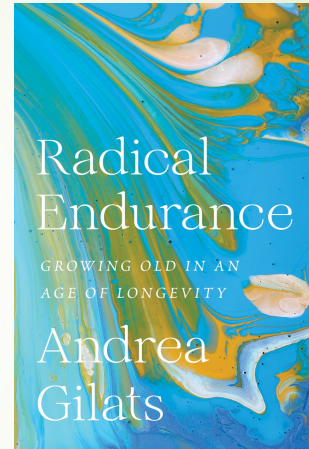
2

# *Radical Endurance*

## *Growing Old in an Age of Longevity*

The University of Minnesota Press is offering a special discount to UMRA members! Get 30% off the cover price of \$19.95 by ordering directly from the Press:

- To order your copy online, Google **university of Minnesota press/radical endurance**.
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- Use discount code **UMRA30** at checkout.



3

## **First, the Good News:**

***We already know how to write!***

4



## Composing and Sharing the Stories of our Lives...

- are acts of optimism.
- meet our essential and interdependent needs for self-expression and connection.
- comprise a rejuvenating process of self-renewal in which we marry our experiences with our emotions, beliefs, and values.

5



## Why the Stories of Our Lives Matter

- They help us come to terms with our pasts.
- They help us know and understand ourselves.
- They help us find peace of mind.
- They allow us to honor the worth and meaning of our lives.
- They allow others, including the people who live after us, to know us.

6



## The Practical Value of “Life” Writing

- It is an aid to recollection and a tool for discovery.
- It is a medium for arriving at clarity.
- It helps us heal from our wounds, losses, and illnesses.
- It allows us to give voice to thoughts we may not be comfortable talking about.
- It transforms our emotions into cogent creative expressions.
- It helps us preserve and expand our vocabularies.
- It fosters our appreciation of other people’s stories.

7



## The Fourfold Writing Process

- It includes lots of **thinking**.
- It naturally turns toward **imagining**.
- It helps us find clarity by **remembering**.
- It **externalizes those thoughts, flights, and memories** by setting them down in a durable form.
- In other words, **writing is not merely recording**.

8

## But... what should I write about?

- A memory, especially one that has stayed with you.
- A transformative experience, event, or person.
- A milestone in your life or a life transition.
- A loss that grieved you.
- Members of your family, especially your ancestors.
- Your travels, near or far, real or imagined.
- A hobby, a memento, a pet, a home.
- A friend, a mentor, or, with sensitivity, any living person.

9

## Some Qualities of a Satisfying Life Story

- It comes from a deep, **authentic** place within us.
- It **integrates** situations, experiences, and actions with thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs
- It tells a **complete, coherent** story, no matter how brief or speculative.
- It follows novelist E. M. Forster's advice: "Only **connect the prose and the passion**, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height."


10



## Writing About Something in Your Past (1 of 2)

- Begin by simply **describing your experience**, allowing yourself as many words as come to you, including (and especially!) words that don't come easily.
- To help you do this, **address the questions that journalists ask**: who, what, when, where, how, and why.
- Remember, you can **make as many changes as you want** before deciding that your story is finished.

11



## Writing About Something in Your Past (2 of 2)

- Write about **how you felt about your experience at the time** it happened. If your recollection is less than perfect, feel free to say that.
- Write about **how you feel now** about what happened then. How have your feelings changed? How about your underlying values and beliefs? Try to come to terms with this part of your past. If this is something that still feels unresolved, feel free to say that.
- Consider **what might make this story meaningful** to those who come after you.

12



## Above all, follow your heart.

- Our digressions and daydreams may actually be our true subjects, no matter where we started.
- We never know exactly what we're going to say until we actually say it.
- Writer Rebecca Solnit says, "You're not trying to get somewhere else but to know where you are. ...Why not ...explore the terrain rather than cutting a swathe through it? Why not meander?"
- Resist brevity! Too few words lead to misunderstandings, mistakes, and functional illiteracy.

13



## Some of My Guiding Practices (1 of 3)

- I try to **say exactly what I mean**. I try not to obfuscate or demur.
- I try for **precision in choosing every word** I write. I don't use words that are not quite right.
- I try not to throw words around. I make sure that I **understand the meaning of a word** before I use it.
- I try to **call things by their correct names**. I don't use euphemisms. I call people by the names they call themselves.

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## Some of My Guiding Practices (2 of 3)

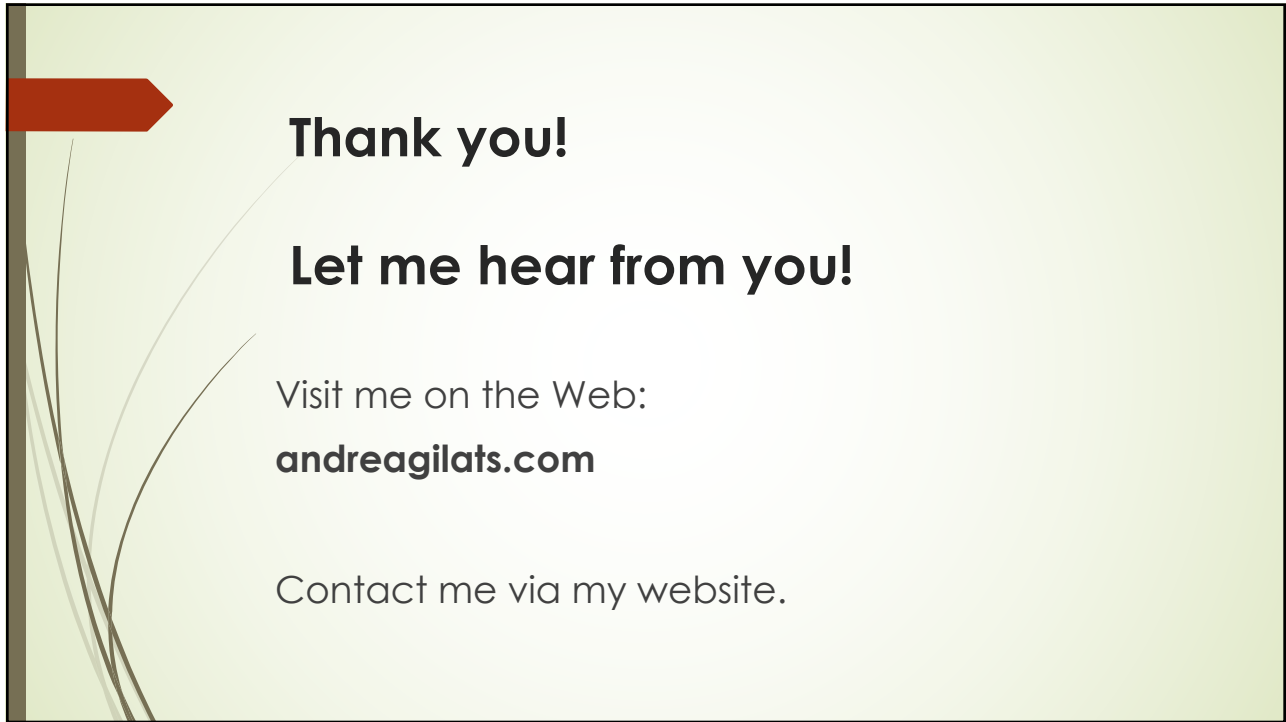
- ▶ I try to **write something—anything**—when I can't think of the right words to express what I want to say. That way I won't forget what I wanted to say.
- ▶ **I am honest with my reader** when I am trying to write about something I can't remember. I admit that I am making my best guess.
- ▶ I aspire to grace. **Every sentence must read fluidly** with no halts or hiccups, and each sentence must lead into the next.
- ▶ I try to make sure that **everything I write advances the purpose of my story**, even my digressions.

15

## Some of My Guiding Practices (3 of 3)

- ▶ I try to **limit my use of indefinite words** and phrases to situations where I want to convey indefiniteness. Then I try to convey indefiniteness clearly. For example, avoid the word **thing**.
- ▶ I try to be conscious of the fact that **I write from my own point of view** and that my reader may not share my point of view.
- ▶ I try to **write about my own humanity** in ways that will allow my readers to find themselves in my writing.
- ▶ I **break up paragraphs** that exceed about 190 words.

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**Thank you!**

**Let me hear from you!**

Visit me on the Web:  
**[andreagilats.com](http://andreagilats.com)**

Contact me via my website.