

[Dear Writers During Hard Times](#) [1]

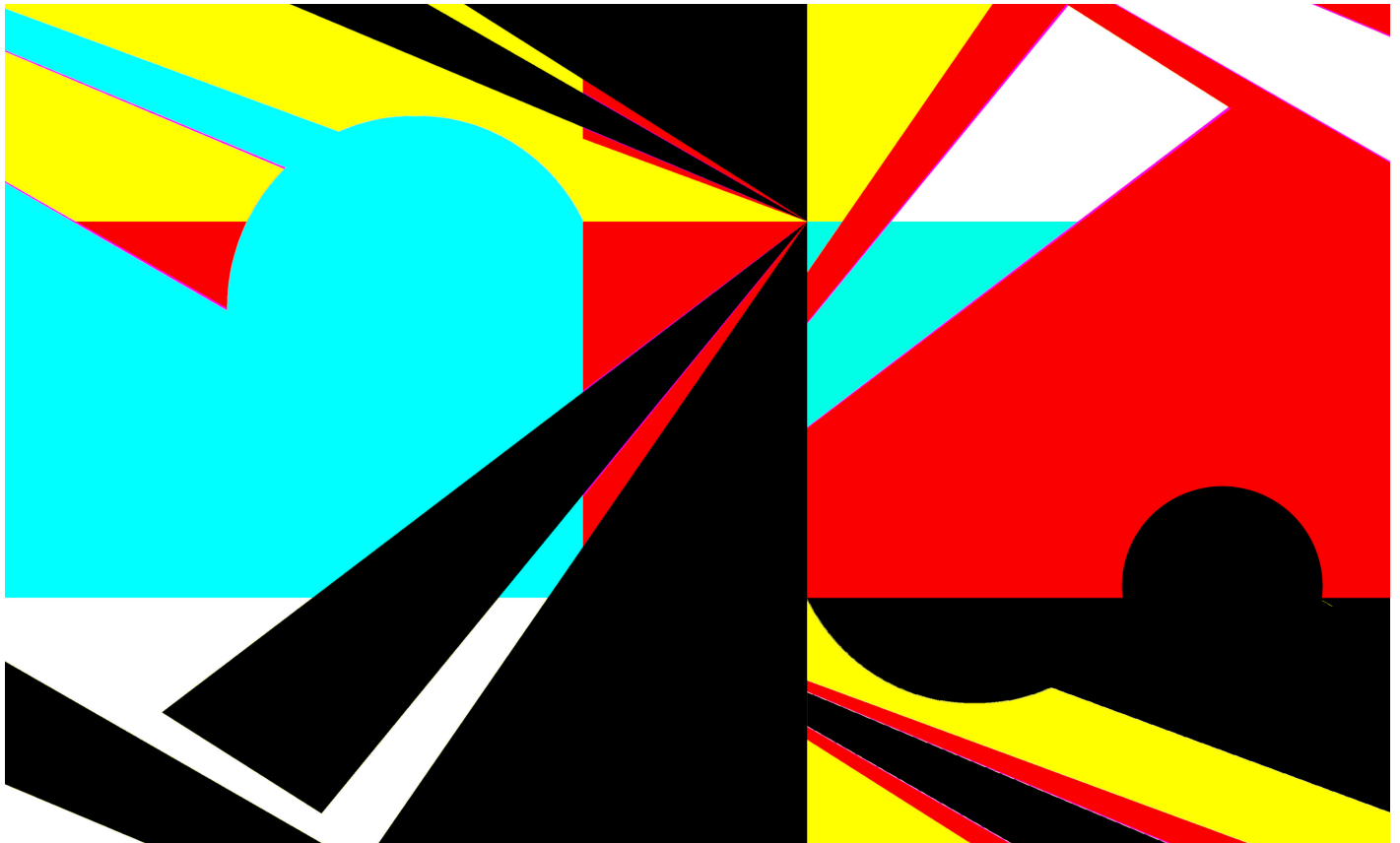
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Open Letter by Martha Nichols

Let's Remake the World



Dear Writers:

Thank you. That's the first thing I want to say—*need* to say. The world at the end of 2020 is a fractious, angry place. Too many people find relief in raging at someone else. I battle my own desire to curl up into a self-protective ball, shivering in a cold, blank night.

But, writers, I love you and your quest for meaning, and I love the writer in myself. I may shiver in the starless night and imagine the worst, but I can also imagine the best—and we can all search for it with words.

These particular words have bubbled up now, probably because I've been talking with so many of you about my hopes for TW's future. As we close our tenth-anniversary issue, I'm stepping away from most of my editing work at *Talking Writing*. The transition would have been emotional regardless, but this hasn't been like any other year. I'm roiled by

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Published on Talking Writing (<https://mail.talkingwriting.com>)

uneasiness. And yet, that roil feeds my creativity. I find myself leaping into new ideas, wondering why I ever gave a damn about the old ones. I'm sparked by joy when I least expect it. I feel that joy as keenly as my sorrows. I'm animated by the fierce intention to figure out what matters.

During hard times, *does art matter?* Yes, more than ever, but the stories we need to tell aren't just aesthetically pleasing ones. They address big questions. They speak directly, in the first-person voice, connecting with readers who are hungry for meaning. Readers may be hungry for certainty, too, which as a writer I can't give. But with one foot in journalism and the other in literary prose, I can offer these wishes for myself and you.

First, let's practice kindness—and it is a practice for me, like meditation or working out with weights. I'm prone to self-righteousness, an introvert who likes to burrow into her own thoughts. Yet I'm learning to practice kindness, even something as simple as saying thank you. Kindness from others has meant a lot to me this year.

Thank you, TW community. Thank you, writers.

Let's embrace imperfection. In April, I had to shift an on-campus journalism workshop at Harvard to a Zoom format, which meant fifteen hours of virtual sessions spread over three days. In the first Zoom session, I asked students to "embrace imperfection." It became a goofy mantra for us—whenever Zoom crashed or a cat rubbed her purring self on a student's screen. At the end of the workshop, my class unmuted themselves to applaud, and I blinked back tears. It was a moment I'll never forget as a teacher, despite everything that went wrong.

Thank you, students. Thank you, writers.

I've begun to accept cognitive dissonance, which I experience almost constantly now. I'm a journalist and an editor and a parent, all roles that encourage judgment in the face of what everyone else thinks. There's the world as you'd like it to be and the world as it is—the desire to entertain readers versus the need to tell the truth. I'm passionate about truth-telling but hate disappointing anyone. So, there it is: cognitive dissonance, both shadow and spark.

Thank you, Fourth Estate. Thank you, writers.

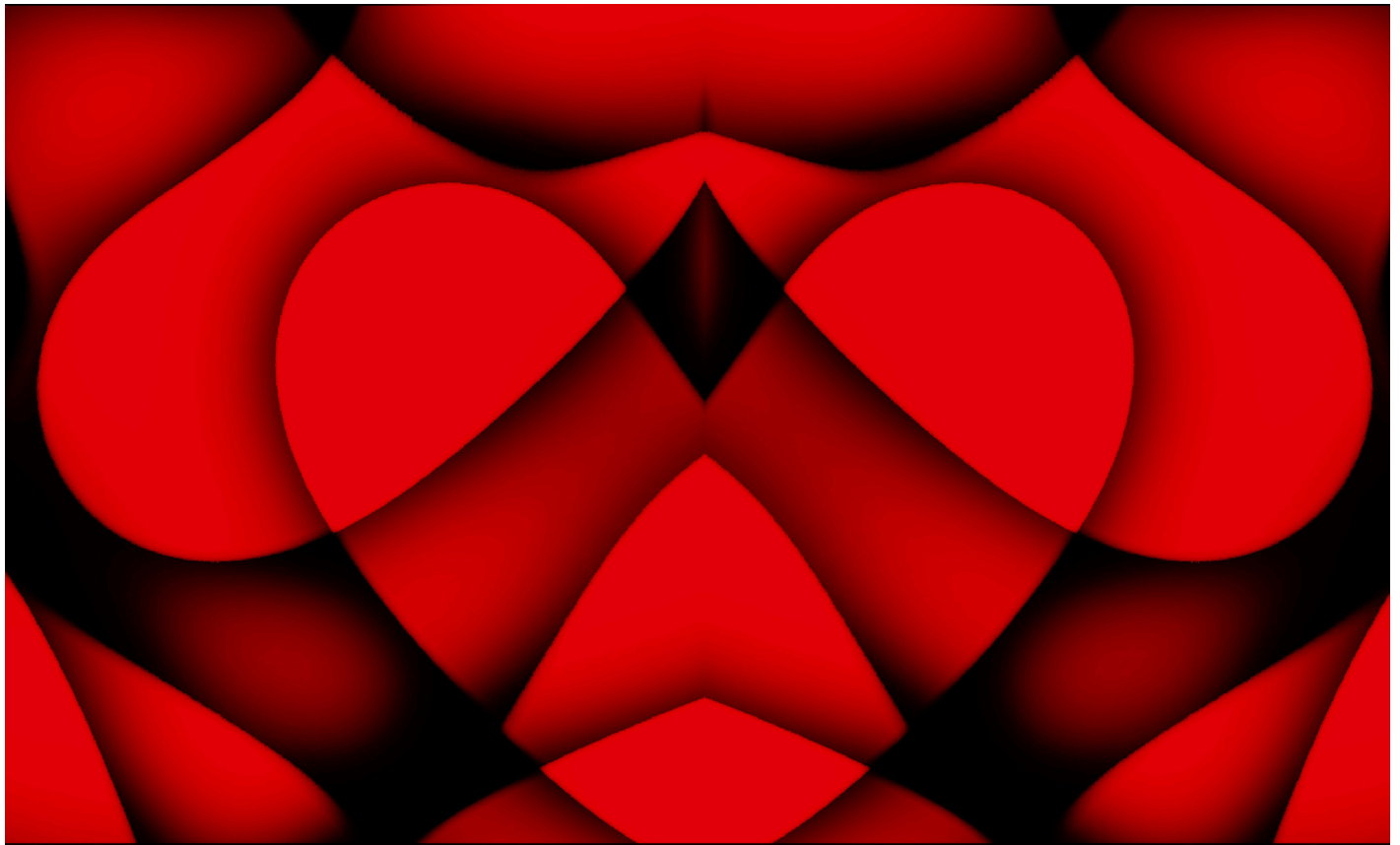
I'll be as honest as possible about the grief I'd rather avoid. My mother was a visual artist who loved bold colors and dark outlines, and she was never shy about saying art saved her life. For her last years, because of multiple spinal surgeries, she was in chronic pain, yet for as long as she could, she'd sit in the warm sun on her tiny patio, piecing together mosaics with shards of colored glass. Two weeks before she died in 2013, my husband and young son and I sang "Yellow Submarine" to her as she lay unspeaking in a care-home bed—until she levered herself up and cried out the chorus with us.

Thank you, family. Thank you, artists and musicians. Thank you, writers.

Let's remake the world together. I believe we can, although a little grandiosity may be required to get us there. I never would have co-founded TW otherwise. But here's what I really want to say: Opposites can both be true. We can be humble amid a world in disarray yet grab for the stars. So be grandiose, writers, rather than self-effacing. Have faith in yourself and your power to make meaning. Without that meaning, we lose the stars and mosaics and silly cats and cartoon hearts and clapping out our windows for healthcare workers. We lose too much to let anyone go.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Love, Martha



Martha's Wishes for 2021

Practice Kindness

Embrace Imperfection
Accept Cognitive Dissonance
Be as Honest as Possible
Remake the World

See [Martha's New Website](#) [5]—and take the Digital Truth Pledge.



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Martha Nichols co-founded *Talking Writing* and is a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School. She's the editor of and a contributor to [*Into Sanity: Essays About Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Living in Between*](#) [7] (Talking Writing Books, 2019). In 2021, Martha will step down as TW's editor in chief, although she'll remain on the TW Board and oversee the Talking Writing Books anthology series. She has also launched a new website that focuses on first-person journalism and her own writing.

For more information—and to sign up for her e-newsletter “True Writing”—subscribe to [Martha Nichols Writer](#) [5].

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