



## Dear America

Matt Malyon | Director and Teaching Writer

No matter where you find yourself on the political spectrum, no matter the job you have, the family you're part of, where you live, or any other variable one might add to the list, it's almost certain that 2020 has been a year of great challenge for you. Perhaps a year unlike any other.

In some ways, the last few years in America have felt similarly challenging. Students from all of our sites have felt this in a variety of ways. So we decided to start asking more directly how they felt. One of the ways we did this was to ask students to respond to a lesson plan centered around the "Dear America" writing prompt: Write a letter to America expressing what you feel. As mentor texts, students have read, among others, Walt Whitman, Denise Levertov, Natalie Diaz, Bob Dylan, and Langston Hughes. The responses came rapidly, as if the students had been simply looking for an outlet to express themselves regarding the topic. We've gathered some of these pieces for publication in our new chapbook, *Dear America*. Evidenced in the selected writings are the various emotions many of us might be feeling ourselves, emotions ranging from gratitude to anger, from sorrow to joy, from calls for change to the naming of the good that exists. Our student writers have many thoughts to share and a willingness to be vulnerable and honest in doing so. They have courage, too, and an insistence on being heard through the written word. As Claudia Castro Luna (Washington State Poet Laureate) points out in her Foreword:

*"... the process of writing is a powerful way to assert the beating of one's heart... They write of alienation, not out of resignation. Quite the contrary, through their writing these young women and men move beyond their circumstances to provide plenty of inspiration to fuel constructive social action in those of us lucky enough to read their words"*

Some of the pieces in *Dear America* are difficult to read. They may, as good writing often does, surface conflicting feelings within the course of an individual piece of writing. They may surface conflicting feelings within oneself. What they surely suggest is that the heightened emotions present in the national conversation exist here also—within our students, within us. We publish the collection in hopes that our students' honesty and vulnerability can open doorways to the heart, movement towards understanding, reaching across the aisle, and a general awareness that the common good must be sought not through entrenched opposition, but in extending to others goodwill and an openness to dialogue.



### I See America Crying

I see America crying  
The times they are ready for a change  
Sorrow has started taking its toll  
Pain lets us down, feeling like we're alone

America, you and I are not all that different  
We all want happiness  
We all deserve to smile and laugh

The times are ready for a change  
To tell each other positive affirmations  
To show proof that laughter can be contagious  
And laughter is a good remedy for the heart and soul

America, you and I are not all that different  
The times they are ready for a change

Tamara  
Skagit County Community Justice Center

*After* Walt Whitman and Bob Dylan

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The *Dear America* chapbook includes a beautiful Foreword by Washington State Poet Laureate, Claudia Castro Luna, student writings, and the "Dear America" lesson plan. Thanks to a publishing grant from REFA (Rick Epting Foundation for the Arts), we are set to publish in the next few weeks. [Pre-order your copy here.](#)

## This week: Friday, Nov. 20, 2020

Once a month, the Skagit Valley Co-Op has a community give-back to local organizations. It's known as 4% Friday, a day on which 4% of the day's total sales are donated to a featured organization. We were honored late last year to be chosen for the 2020 installment of this program, and our day will be [this week: Friday, November 20, 2020](#). Please consider doing your shopping (in-person or online) this Friday at the Skagit Valley Co-Op in Mount Vernon, WA, and please let others know about this opportunity. [More about the 4% Friday program here.](#)

## Gratitude & Updates



### Thanks and shout-outs!

We're grateful to the National Book Foundation, the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses, and the Academy of American Poets for jointly providing us with a recent grant.

### Forthcoming in the near future

*Dear America* - new chapbook of student writing - late 2020

Website upgrade - late 2020

*Letters to a Young Inmate* initiative - launching in early 2021

### Covid-19 Updates

We continue to prioritize student safety by adhering to the state-required Covid-19 precautions. Although this means we are not facilitating in-person workshops at this time, we continue to create e-deliverable workshops for all our sites. In addition to the projects mentioned above, we continue to publish student writing via social media and intermittent Covid-19 era episodes of The Underground Writing Podcast & *KITE*.



[Students | Migrant Leaders Club]

**Underground Writing** is a literature-based creative writing program serving migrant, incarcerated, recovery, and other at-risk communities in northern Washington through literacy and personal transformation. Underground Writing facilitates generative readings of literature spanning the tradition—from ancient texts to those written in our workshops. Honoring the transforming power of the word, we believe that attentive reading leads to attentive writing, and that attentive writing has the power to assist in the restoration of communities, the imagination, and individual lives.

Our **newsletter** is published every other month, along with special editions and updates throughout the year. For 2020, we'll be sharing stories/reflections written by our faculty of Teaching Writers, featuring our various workshop sites in Skagit Valley, Washington.

### Underground Writing sites:

- Skagit County Juvenile Detention (Youth)
- Mount Vernon Migrant Leaders Club (Youth - Mount Vernon School District)
- Skagit Valley Recovery Community (Adults)
- YMCA Oasis Daylight Center (Youth)
- Skagit County Community Justice Center (Adults)

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Order our anthologies of student writing.



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