

A Letter from the Publisher of Nautilus

My name is John Steele. I am the publisher and editorial director of Nautilus. Yesterday an open letter was posted on the National Writers Union website, signed by 19 freelance writers. It stated some writers and editors are "awaiting payment from Nautilus magazine for a collective debt totaling \$50,000. Some of us have been waiting to be paid for more than a year." It's true that Nautilus has a large, outstanding debt to our contributors. I want to explain how Nautilus got into this situation, and how we plan to get out of it.

Nautilus was started and published with institutional and philanthropic financial support from the John Templeton Foundation and several other science institutions and philanthropies. In the fall of 2016, it became clear that at least some of those grants would not renew, and that our revenue base would not be able to support the magazine at its then level of activity. I determined that our best option was to find an institutional home for Nautilus with the resources that could ensure its editorial mission and growth. It was later that year that we started talks with a number of institutions, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or AAAS.

Early in 2017, I was confident that a merger of Nautilus into AAAS, supported by philanthropic foundations, was imminent, and reflected that confidence to our staff and contributors. I delayed some payments to writers and artists, but told our editors that our financial course was steady and that we needed to continue putting out the best magazine we could to continue to attract the interest of our suitors. As a result, editorial staff continued to commission work in good faith, based on the information I gave them. The open letter remarks that I instructed the staff to commission articles that I "knew that Nautilus could not pay for." That is not accurate.

By March of 2017, Nautilus' finances had become critical. We missed payrolls and lost staff, and it became clear to me we could not operate at the levels of the previous three years. We stopped commissioning new market-rate work, shifting to book excerpts, free content, and tiny honoraria. Our sales revenue was growing and there were donations coming in from our supporters. Salaries and expenses were deeply cut. When revenue, donations or small grants came in, we sent out checks to reduce the outstanding debt to contributors, which at the beginning of the year was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Still, my over-confidence that a merger was around the corner prompted me to over-promise, continually, when payments would be made. It was a big mistake on my part for which I sincerely apologize. I OK'd the hiring of interns that I thought could fit into our existing cash flow. I explained the financial challenges and assured them payment that, unfortunately, didn't materialize. I sent a letter to our readers on September 3, explaining that we were facing challenges as we sought funding, and was deeply encouraged to receive an outpouring of support, much of it financial. The situation was more dire than portrayed.

We kept publishing. If we didn't, Nautilus' value to a potential partner would disappear, leaving shutdown the only option, which would mean that nobody would get paid. As long as the merger talks continued, Nautilus had a way forward.

The merger talks continued through the summer but abruptly ended in September. I scrambled to find other potential partners or buyers for Nautilus, and many of those talks continue today. Though a positive outcome for Nautilus is not certain, the magazine is a tremendous asset with a large, loyal audience that appreciates the style, imagination and rigor of our exploration of science.

It's a challenging time for media and magazines in particular. Everyone at Nautilus is invested, both emotionally and financially in what we have created.

Since April of this year, we have paid over \$130,000 to writers and artists' for past-due invoices. Recently we received two small grants. We have used those grants, combined with our revenue, to pay in full two of the authors who signed the open letter. We will be sending out partial payments to another two of them today. By the end of the year, we will pay in full another three of the 19 writers. We are putting a significant percent of our monthly revenue—everything that does not go toward our overhead—to meeting our debt to writers. I continue to work as hard as ever to find an institutional home for Nautilus. I will aggressively pursue debt repayment into 2018 for all of the authors and illustrators we owe, as we have been doing in 2017. We are committed to pay every dollar we owe to contributors, vendors and staff

I want to again make clear that nobody on the Nautilus staff commissioned any work that they knowingly thought wouldn't be paid for. The staff operated from my instructions and my expectations of resources available. I take full responsibility and am upset by accusations that the staff deceived contributors or interns. Since we began, our editors have worked to nurture great working

relationships with writers, artists, and interns. All of them have been working on fractional salaries, despite doing a greater workload due to the departures of their colleagues.

The ability to pay our debts depends on our continued operations, and our continued status as one of today's premier outlets for science writing. We understand that we need to maintain a good relationship with our talented contributors. In our four years of publishing, we are proud to have paid out over \$2 million to writers, artists, web and graphic designers, and animators. The story of Nautilus has not unfolded as we had hoped, but it's not over either.