Dear friends,

Looking back at 2019, one lesson stands out to me: To move medicine upstream we must cultivate a certain characteristic in ourselves. We know some of the core qualities of effective Upstreamists: passionate, committed, strategic, focused, humble, nimble. But now I know more deeply than ever that our work also requires us to be bold. Even audacious. I know this because HealthBegins has had the privilege this year of partnering with some truly bold leaders, and I have seen what their courage can achieve. One of our health-system clients, for example, worked with partners to launch a strategy across multiple states to help end homelessness in communities they work with. Another launched a major initiative to help end food insecurity for patients and communities nationwide. With our help, still other clients and partners are embarking on new efforts to reach beyond individual social needs and tackle broader social and structural determinants of health, such as structural racism and economic inequality.

That is the kind of boldness that's required for transforming health systems and taking on deep and established health inequity. And it is part of what fills me with excitement as I reflect on the accomplishments of 2019 and anticipate our continued work together in 2020.

As the new year’s bold initiatives take shape, I recommend we ground ourselves in three principles of practice: place, story, and trust.

**Place**: Addressing social needs and social determinants of health can seem overwhelming — until we ground that work in a particular place. To define our activities within a specific geographic area, with its unique needs and assets and cultures, and to do so with partners who are equally rooted in that area, is critically important for the success of any bold upstream transformation effort.

**Story**: So much of what we’ve learned about this work is that it’s about active listening. We listen to the stories of our partners, understanding what drives them and what unique expertise they bring. We elevate the people whose voices and stories are often not included. Then, as we move upstream together, we help create bold new stories, new expectations of what’s possible, about what our roles and responsibilities are and what our potential impact can be.

**Trust**: As we move into the next phase of work, this is the currency that matters most: the ability to forge and maintain trust. Trust is not a technical issue; it’s a human issue. We will find in the new year that we need to seek and elevate the wisdom of people who have deep, trusting relationships in communities. For example, what can hospitals learn about building trust from community health workers or teachers? And to maintain trust, we will need clear mechanisms that communities can use to hold institutions and policymakers accountable for commitments to improve health equity.

In closing, I want to honor a bold leader in this movement who embodied these fundamental lessons — my mentor and friend, Fitzhugh Mullan, who recently passed away. Throughout a prolific career as a teacher, writer, administrator, and researcher, Dr. Mullan was an unflinching advocate for equity. He shaped the careers of thousands of clinicians as the director of the National Health Service Corps, of which I am a proud alum, and the Global Health Equity Scholars. He started the “Narrative Matters” section of Health Affairs, which has remained one of the journal’s most popular sections. And he helped launch the Beyond Flexner Alliance, which is shaping how future health professionals will pursue a social mission. Overall, it is no stretch to say that Dr. Mullan reshaped American health care for the better.

Dr. Mullan was a giant, but at this reflective time of year I invite you to meditate on others who have been fearless leaders in your world, even on smaller scales. Their lives tell us what it looks like to be bold — how to build trust, listen to and renew stories, and ultimately improve outcomes place by place — not just for a moment but for a lifetime.

As we look into the year ahead, we at HealthBegins think each of you who has been a part of this upstream movement. I’ll end with hope of what we will accomplish together in the next year. From our families to yours, Happy holidays and new year! Best,

Rishi Manchanda

Have a topic or tool that you’d love to see us tackle in 2020? Please tell us! Email at info@healthbegins.org.