Thank you for reading *Take Us To A Better Place*.

*Fiction has tremendous power to transport us to new places and to reveal familiar places in new ways.*

*We published this collection of short stories to help us all imagine, explore, and talk about a Culture of Health—a time and place where everyone in the United States has the opportunity to live their healthiest life possible—and how we might get there.*

*In the pages that follow, we’ve shared a few questions for each story to get the conversation started. We hope they help spark a lively discussion and healthy debate!*  

*Keep the conversation going at #TakeUsToABetterPlace.*
Kyle and Bobby, long-lost lovers from different backgrounds, reconnect in a South ravaged by global warming. The disparities and inequities between their two worlds are juxtaposed against nature and utopia on an eco-protected island in North Carolina. In a United States where the walls seem to be closing in, a sci-fi solution is proposed to forge ahead against encroaching coastlines.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Twenty thousand people have migrated to and now live on the flotilla at Bird Island. But Bobby’s real mission is to save humanity. What does it mean to hope for something better, not just for the few but for everyone?

2. Upon entering the flotilla at Bird Island, Kyle says, “. . . this was the future I wanted for all of us, one that I didn’t know was possible.” How closely does the flotilla at Bird Island resemble the future you want for our nation? What might you keep and what might you change?

3. What are some of the most promising solutions to health, equity, and climate change?

4. Think about divides in your own community—racial, political, economic. Would these divides widen if a wide-scale catastrophe were to take place, or do you believe that such strife would bring people together?

5. The characters in both “Paradise” and “The Flotilla at Bird Island” have fled dangerous situations—seeking refuge from the atrocities in Syria, and the impacts of climate change, respectively. Whose responsibility is it to provide shelter to refugees, regardless of where or why they flee? How do we plan for a future where the number of climate refugees is likely to increase?
Rita is a Syrian refugee whose family has escaped the conflict to Arizona—but not without a cost. Her mother was killed back home, and her father and brother carry bullet wounds that have dramatically shaped their lives in the States. Facing xenophobia and racism at school and work, Rita and her brother struggle every day in the face of systems and individuals who fail to support refugees and immigrants.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rita privately suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifests itself in various ways, though no one in her family or at her school is aware of it. How might we do better to help recent immigrants or refugees suffering from PTSD? What are unique barriers people like Rita may experience to seeking or getting help?

2. There are numerous instances in the story where “the system” fails Rita and her family. What would it take to build a society that does not fail refugee families? What might those systems look like?

3. Seeing Paul’s art on her door is an important moment for Rita. How do art and storytelling help create empathy?

4. How might people be more like Paul and do better to help recent refugees acclimate and feel less isolated?

5. The notion of being saved by a hero appears in both “Paradise” and “The Plague Doctors.” What has been the role of heroes in your life? How have heroes in your life and in society more broadly helped and harmed us?
In a future society, two teens find out what happens when seemingly innocuous “community games” serve a more sinister purpose. It turns out that these popular means of social interaction are quietly eroding civil liberties and privacy as neighbors collect data on one another and report it to shadowy rulers and a power-hungry elite.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some possible downsides to rewarding people for eating well, exercising, and helping out their communities?

2. Data is a powerful tool in helping us understand health and how to improve it. What safeguards do we need to put in place to ensure that data-gathering is not abused?

3. Miz Laura and the other sentinels keep a close eye on the Town. What do you watch out for in your neighborhood? Do you have health equity concerns about encouraging those kinds of efforts? How might that change in the future and why?

4. Every action Kimmy takes is monitored. Cameras, sensors, and other tracking devices line our pockets and our streets too. As surveillance increasingly becomes a part of daily life, is privacy still important?

5. Do you think the Town has built a Culture of Health? What seems to be working in the Town? If the Town’s protagonists’ intentions were well-meaning, where did they maybe go wrong?

6. Like Achy Obejas’s story, “The Sweet Spot,” “The Erasure Game” explores new family structures through the idea of households—groups of apartments where residents live with roommates, as well as relatives who all eat together. What makes a family? Whom do you count as family? How might the idea of “family” look in the future?
THE SWEET SPOT

ACHY OBEJAS

A woman with progressive hearing loss is separating from her wife. It’s not her decision. There’s lots wrong in the marriage but also lots right, and she has developed a number of dependencies—many, in fact—around her hearing loss. As the marriage falls apart, the ex-wife withdraws some of these safety nets, and the woman has to reconfigure who she is and how she finds support.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As Isa’s hearing deteriorates, so does her relationship with her wife and her kids. How do personal relationships impact health, and vice versa? How can we assist individuals and families dealing with the complex emotional toll that health and medical issues can have?

2. The loss of hearing—and the use of hearing aids—affects Isa’s quality of life, her relationship with herself, and her identity. How has a change in health for you or a loved one impacted the way in which you see yourself and others?

3. The hearing technician tells Isa: “You want everything to be the same, to locate sound perfectly, but you’re going to have to work at it, to listen differently, to mark and measure space and find your sweet spot.” In today’s changing society, how are you finding your “sweet spot” for building a Culture of Health?

4. Louise and Esther and then Isa and Esther form a strong bond, and eventually, with their children, become a family. How has the concept of “family” changed over the years? Whom do you count as “family”?

5. Family disconnection is a theme that runs through both “The Sweet Spot” and “The Masculine and the Dead.” Is modern living making it harder to keep families together? How could we make life easier for families in the future?
Daniel Goodroad, an American Indian teenager, is losing hope. Just as he’s about to give up, he encounters a horse. Forming a natural bond, the two meet up with a Native elder who helps Daniel reconnect with his culture. Equipped with the tools to raise himself up in order to reclaim both culture and community, Daniel—now an elder himself—demonstrates the power of recollection, reclamation, and preservation.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Cultural reconnection puts Daniel on the path to a healthier life. As the United States struggles with a skyrocketing suicide rate, how can we help more people reconnect with their country, community, and culture?

2. How can schools be better equipped to help students like Daniel?

3. Events of the past that disrupted and destroyed Indigenous Peoples and culture continue to impact American Indian and Alaska Native people today—these people experience poverty, poor health, and unemployment at far higher rates than the rest of the population. How might we help heal this intergenerational trauma?

4. The ideas and traditions of indigenous culture—represented by the horse, a powerful symbol for many tribes—bring strength and healing to Daniel. How can inherited wisdom or indigenous knowledge help us build a Culture of Health?

5. Elders play an important role in “Reclamation,” and also in Yoon Ha Lee’s “The Erasure Game.” Do older generations play an important role in your family or community? How can we build a future where older Americans are valued and empowered?
On a space station near Jupiter, station manager Jixy discovers one of her friends, Greggy, an “augmented human,” has been brutally murdered. The crime resembles past incidents on other stations where people were attacked and their augmented body parts stolen. A semi-mythical figure called Piecework has been blamed for the attacks. Determined to protect the others on the station, Jixy sets out to see if Piecework—or someone else—is responsible for the crime.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rovers are people who volunteered for a work program that meant giving up their legs and arms and most of their insides for “augments.” Despite this heroic act, rovers are treated like machines, not humans. How does this discrimination play out in the story?

2. Jixy tells us that just about everyone has prostheses or internal medical augments of some kind. What do you think the future of medicine and notions of “medically driven enhancement” holds?

3. In the face of a challenge, Australia’s Aboriginal people often ask the profound question: “What kind of ancestor do you want to be?” How do you think Vision Space Dynamics, the corporation that created Piecework, would have answered that question?

4. The title of this story is “Obsolescence.” When we have built a Culture of Health, what will have become obsolete? And what will be the consequences?

5. Both “Obsolescence” and “Paradise” portray inequities in who has access to quality, affordable health care. What are some of the most promising solutions to ensure everyone in America has the health care they need, when they need it?
When a popular high school football player dies from a mystery illness, Glory, a reporter for a large online media conglomerate, is determined to get to the bottom of what happened before it spreads any further. But she finds herself up against the local sports culture and the conflicting goals of her employer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The media corporation that Glory works for understands the role of local news: as the story says, “You didn’t care about speed bumps and road signs in someone else’s town. You cared about your own.” How do you access local news—news about your town or city—now? Is “hyperlocal” content the future of journalism?

2. Why does Jynette want a “feel-bad story”? What is the media’s responsibility to report on problems versus solutions?

3. In the story, players are constantly tracking stats—from heart rate, blood pressure, and eye-tracking to hours logged playing and sleeping. Even though the coach says it’s the players’ decision whether to share their data, how true do you think this statement is? How can the importance placed on high school sports positively and negatively impact student health and well-being?

4. What is the role of local, regional, national, and global media outlets in sharing information about disease outbreaks and prevention? What are some of the challenges journalists face in reporting on issues of public health?

5. As with Karen Lord’s “The Plague Doctors,” “Viral Content” is a story of a community that survives, even when the odds are stacked against them. What do these two stories tell us about community resilience and how communities can overcome adversity?
Harry and Dean are twentysomething roommates just starting their adult lives in New York. An encounter with Raquin, the person who was forcibly evicted from the apartment they now rent, illuminates the trauma of gentrification. The characters each seek to be heard and understood in a modern world that is indifferent to the human condition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Roommates Harry and Dean each have a private side that they keep hidden from family, friends—and each other. Is the gap between how we act in public and behind closed doors shifting or changing in today’s society? If so, is that shift generational?

2. Harry struggles with how to act around Raquin. What does Baker’s story say about our ability to connect across social divides and cultural differences?

3. How does the manner in which we inhabit public space (parks, subways, sidewalks, etc.) and private space reinforce or break down the larger divisions in American society?

4. Across the United States, rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods and rising housing costs are pushing people out of their homes. How can we revitalize our communities in ways that improve health for all our neighbors? Does improvement need to result in displacement?

5. Together, “Brief Exercises in Mindfulness” and “Paradise” illuminate how destructive racism is. What can we all do to identify racism and work toward a more equitable, healthy society? Do you see signs of hope in these stories?
In 2079, a mysterious illness called grey pox is killing large portions of the population. When the illness finally reaches the remote Pelican Island, a team of researchers including Audra Lee—whose own young niece has been affected—must muster all of their meager resources to help find a cure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Lord’s story, characters report more and more restrictions on communication and movement, and growing media control and censorship. Are these actions reassuring to the characters or do they stoke their fears? How ethical do you think these actions are?

2. So often we look to our governments, large corporations, and other power centers to solve complex social challenges. Lord’s story is a celebration of the community workers who save humanity with their own ingenuity and risk-taking. How can we build community power and catalyze more community-driven solutions to some of our most pressing problems?

3. When Dagmar discovers the clinical trial data that ultimately leads the team to finding a cure, it becomes clear that the medical industry has been working secretly to save only the “worthy.” What are the implications of a decision like this? Who is considered worthy and who is most often left behind?

4. When Audra looks at Colin’s heavily scarred, masked face, she wonders why he didn’t have the strength to bear his daughter’s sorrow. Why is it that so often the right thing to do is the hard thing to do? Why do we often make decisions that may seem to go against our own best interests or our collective interests?

5. Toward the end of the story, Audra says, “Our Network will always need resources. Continue to be our facilitator, and find people to fund us. But don’t dare call it charity. Tell them to invest in the world they’d like to live in, the world they’d like to leave to future generations.” When you make a donation, do you think of it as charity or as an investment?

6. Like “The Flotilla at Bird Island,” “The Plague Doctors” offers a dystopian yet hopeful view of the future. How can we find hope and use it to fuel our collective efforts to build a healthy future?
THE MASCULINE AND THE DEAD

FRANK BILL

An ex-marine, rural individualist Guy is a rugged Samaritan in his small-town community. But this performance of ideals only stretches so far. Having lost his wife to cancer, he struggles to reconnect with his only child. It’s not until he steps in to care for the neglected son of an opioid-addicted man that he learns emotional responsibility and the skills to rebuild his severed ties.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does Bill’s story deal with male identity and society’s definitions of masculinity?

2. Guy’s volunteer deployments in Afghanistan caused him to miss the death of his wife and ruptured his relationship with his son, Hodge. We meet Guy at a time when he has yet to face the feelings associated with the death of his wife and his subsequent estrangement from his son, as well as his son’s sexuality. How does Guy deal with his PTSD? How can we maintain social connections and build healthy relationships when faced with traumas, like fighting war or personal struggles?

3. Kopp is a particularly monstrous character. Should Guy, nevertheless, have worked harder to be inclusive? What are the boundaries of inclusivity and cohesion?

4. It was difficult, challenging, and personally risky for Guy to intervene and help Bo. It took a certain kind of courage. We might all hope we would act similarly if faced with the same circumstances. Are there limits to this approach—and might it ever backfire? What else can we do to end child abuse?

5. In “Brief Exercises in Mindfulness,” gentrification sees Raquin’s community reinvented, but with some devastating effects. In contrast, in “The Masculine and the Dead,” Guy’s community reinvents itself into a prospering economic cooperative. What are some promising approaches for strengthening our communities in ways that improve health and well-being for everyone?

"GUY BELIEVED THERE WAS A FREEDOM IN THE U.S. THAT OTHERS TOOK FOR GRANTED: ONE SIDE LIVED COMFORTABLE, WHILE ANOTHER SIDE FOUGHT AND SACRIFICED FOR THE OTHER SIDE'S COMFORT."