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In order to help my patients determine what life factors might be contributing to their health conditions, I developed a diagnostic and treatment wellness model I call the “Whole Health Cairn” based on the findings of my research, which incorporates not just how the mind can heal or harm the body, but also physical, emotional, and environmental health factors that contribute to whole health. (I debuted the Whole Health Cairn in a popular TEDx talk I gave in 2011 called [“The Shocking Truth About Your Health”](#))

In my medical training, I had been introduced to several wellness models—pie charts and pyramids that talked about nutrition, exercise, social health, mental health, and so forth. Most of the models included the body as the foundation upon which everything else in life builds. But something had always struck me as “off” about these models. Not only did I question whether the body was the foundation upon which everything else builds; I also didn’t resonate with being able to take out pieces of wellness, like you’d cut out a slice of pie. I envisioned something more intertwined, where all aspects of health were interrelated, and the body was the sum total of the balance of all aspects of a wholly healthy life.

The vision for a new wellness model first came to me while I was hiking on a coastal trail in my beloved Northern California home. As an artist, I've always loved "cairns"—those stacks of balanced stones you see adorning beaches and marking hiking trails and sacred landmarks. I love the Zen of them, but most importantly, the simultaneous strength and fragility of them. A well-built cairn can withstand the crashing of the waves upon it, yet if you move one stone too far out of balance, the whole thing topples. All stones depend upon the others for stability.

Like a cairn, the body is awe-inspiringly strong and resilient, and at the same time, fragile and easy to tip out of balance. If whole health is a stack of balanced stones, the body is the stone on top, the most precarious, the most likely to tumble if other stones are out of balance. And as I learned on my own self-healing journey, the foundation stone, the one upon which everything else builds, is your "Inner Pilot Light," your built-in healer, that inner knowing, the intuitive wisdom of your body and soul that knows what's true for you and guides you, in your own unique way, back to better health.

Atop the Inner Pilot Light lie all the other contributing factors that affect health—relationships, work/ life purpose, creativity, spirituality, sexuality, finances, mental health, and the environment. The very top of the Whole Health Cairn is where your body's physical health rests. The Whole Health Cairn is surrounded by the "Healing Bubble," of love, gratitude, service, and pleasure—the glue I believe holds everything in balance. Love and compassion, not just from loving family, friends and health-care providers, but especially for yourself, are tantamount when you're embarking upon a self-healing journey. Love opens your heart, trumps fear, and paves the way for healing in all aspects of your life.

Gratitude is also important. Without gratitude, you may focus only on what's lacking in your life, rather than what you appreciate. When that happens, this process can spiral you downward into overwhelm and despair, which only increase stress responses. You have to fill your cup and appreciate what you already have before you can face the truth about what isn't working and what might need to change. Gratitude keeps you optimistic, and as we've seen, evidence shows that optimism improves your health. When you focus on gratitude, positive things flow in more readily, making you even more grateful. As long as you keep your gratitude vessel full, you'll avoid the unhealthy plunge into dark places, which can accompany this process if you're not careful.

Service is another part of the Healing Bubble. Dedicating our lives to serving the world connects us to each other and reminds us to focus on something bigger than ourselves. Cami Walker, author of *29 Gifts*, treated her multiple sclerosis with a practice of giving one gift per day for 29 days, which sparked an entire movement. Committing your life to serving and healing others, even in small ways, can be big-time medicine for the body, mind, and soul.

And pleasure just makes the whole darn thing more fun, while also perking up the body with health-inducing hormones like endorphins, dopamine, nitric oxide, and oxytocin. The healing process, while scary at times, should be pleasurable, so make sure you throw in a dollop of laughter, sensual pleasures, playfulness, and fun.

Each stone in the Whole Health Cairn is vital to the healing process, and the Healing Bubble contributes to the healthy hormonal milieu that provides just the right Petri dish for our minds and hearts to shift so our cells can heal. Keep in mind how important it is to keep your inner chatter supportive and affirming during this process. If you let your inner critic try to beat you into taking care of your body, it just doesn't work. If you're constantly telling yourself how fat, ugly, addicted, noncompliant, sick, lame, undisciplined, or worthless you are, this process is likely to fail. You have to practice radical kindness with yourself, or you'll lose hope and fall into bad habits.

The only way to truly heal is to engage in radical self-care born of genuine love and compassion for yourself. Listening to the wise, caring voice of your Inner Pilot Light will help you do this. As you learn to soften your inner critics, you'll find that you are your own best friend, and as you trust the knowing voice of your truth, your body will relax and your self-repair mechanisms will be able to kick in.

Most wellness models teach that the body is the foundation for everything in life, that without a healthy body, everything else suffers. But we've gotten it all backward. The body isn't the foundation of your health. The body is the physical manifestation of the sum of your life experiences. When your life is out of alignment with your Inner Pilot Light and the stones of your Whole Health Cairn are out of balance, your mind gets stressed, and when your mind is under stress, your body suffers. The good news is that, if you're not optimally healthy, you can make changes that may profoundly affect your body's health.