In March 1999, Bertrand Piccard made aviation history by circumnavigating the earth in a balloon. In an exclusive interview with Paradigm, he talked about his record-breaking flight and how his insights from that journey can be applied to everyday life.

LIVING with a of ADVE

Around the world in 19 days

Lifting off from Switzerland on March 1, 1999, Bertrand Piccard and his co-pilot, Brian Jones, became the first men to circumnavigate the globe in a balloon. The journey, which lasted 19 days, 21 hours and 55 minutes, broke records for distance, duration and height. Their craft, the Breitling Orbiter 3, was a 55-meter-high helium and hot-air balloon connected to a tiny pressurized cabin. Their flight path took them south to North Africa then east across the Arabian Peninsula, India and China, where they were restricted to a tightly defined corridor. Over the vast expanse of the Pacific they lost the jet stream and were nearly caught in violent storms. Over the Gulf of Mexico, they gasped for breath as excess CO^2 built up in the capsule. Throughout the flight, the pilots struggled with defective propane gas burners for the balloon, ice sheets that added extra weight and a heating system that let the cabin temperature to fall –2° C. After crossing an imaginary finish line in Mauritania, they touched down in the Egyptian desert.

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VENTURE

Parallels between a historic flight and an “inner journey”

A breathtaking view of the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps from Breitling Orbiter 3 at the start of its historic journey.

What was the most difficult moment of your historic journey?

For my co-pilot, Brian, it was when we lost the jet stream over the Pacific and were making little progress. He felt completely alone in the middle of that vast ocean. For me, it was day 17 over the Gulf of Mexico. We thought we could succeed but then lost the jet stream again and were going in the wrong direction. We had a bad equilibrium of carbon dioxide and oxygen in the cabin and were struggling to breathe.

How did you and your co-pilot support each other?

By respecting each other very deeply. We knew that we were very different, and that's what made us a good team. We were never afraid or tired at the same time. When Brian was down, I helped him by accepting his problem and supporting him. When I was really bad, he did the same.

What was the hardest physical part: the cold, the smallness of the capsule?

The capsule was very small (5.40 m long, 2.25 m wide, 2.85 m high) but it wasn't a claustrophobic situation, in which you typically want the walls to explode. At those heights, we were glad to be in a pressurized cabin with oxygen. During the last few days, when the heaters started to fail, it was –2° C in the capsule. We put on every piece of clothing we could find and it was still impossible to get warm. The reserves of water were blocks of ice that we thawed out with the heat of our hands to drink. But honestly, the physical part wasn't the worst.

So we are talking about the mental aspects?

Yes. The most difficult thing was staying confident that we would succeed — remember that nobody had done this before. This was a six-year project with failures and doubts, with people laughing at us. Breitling Orbiter 1 had to be cancelled after only a few hours due to a kerosene leakage. In Orbiter 2, we set some duration records, but still landed far short of our goal. Being a pioneer means that you accept the possibility of failing. Look at your CEO. As the first challenger from Switzerland to go after the America's Cup, Ernesto Bertarelli is a pioneer. He has the strength to try something that has never been done before. We have to kindle the same pioneering spirit in our everyday life, to tackle those things we avoid because we are afraid of failing. There is just one way in life to guarantee failure — that is to give up.

How did your team on the ground support you?

They were absolutely vital. Dozens of people and years of effort went into the preparations for this flight. After launch, we continued to depend heavily on them. For example, when we crossed the Pacific, we had to choose between the northern or the southern route. It was a critical moment that meant the difference between success or failure. We had two weathermen. One said go north, the other said go south. Because we had this great teamwork, neither tried to convince the other that he was right. There was no ego involved, no fight for power. Together, they examined why the two weather models were in opposition. By being so open, they came to a common decision, and we went south.

You put the outcome of the flight in their hands?

They trusted us as pilots, and we trusted them as weathermen. Just as we trusted the air traffic controllers at SkyGuide in Geneva, who did a fabulous job in getting us permission to fly through the airspace of various countries. That's what makes a team of professionals. Each member of the team trusts the other's abilities and focuses on what he or she does best. In the other teams, everyone was working for the pilot. In our team, everyone was working with the pilot.

In the book about your historic flight, *The Greatest Adventure*, you spoke about an "invisible hand" that guided you. Do you believe in destiny?

I do believe each one of us has a destiny. But you can find it or lose it. I have seen people who have been completely out of their destiny; they have suffered their whole life, desperately trying to obtain things that were not in the flow of their fate. People made quite a fuss about our reference to the invisible hand. What Brian Jones and I wanted to say was this: In our Western tradition, we focus too heavily on technology. We lost a sense of spirituality when science began to claim that we could explain everything empirically. It is a great loss. There is a spiritual side to life and we have to respect it.

"The balloon flight was a historical event, but it is also a metaphor for life."

You come from a family of famous adventurers. Did you feel pressure to live up to their extraordinary standards?

My father left me free to follow my own path and pick my own profession. There was no pressure, but there was constant exposure to exploring new things. During the years we lived in Cape Canaveral, we often had marine explorers or astronauts over for dinner. I was privileged to see a number of Apollo missions lift off from the vantage point of mission control. My round-the-world balloon flight was the logical consequence of the curiosity that my family and my education awakened in me.

How did you get interested in becoming a psychiatrist?

People sometimes forget that I also had a mother! She developed in me an interest in psychology and philosophy – all the things that touch the human mind and spirit. I combined that with the love of exploration from my father and grandfather. I believe in approaching life with a sense of adventure — not just studying it, but experiencing it.

How do your insights from flying and ballooning apply to your psychiatric practice?

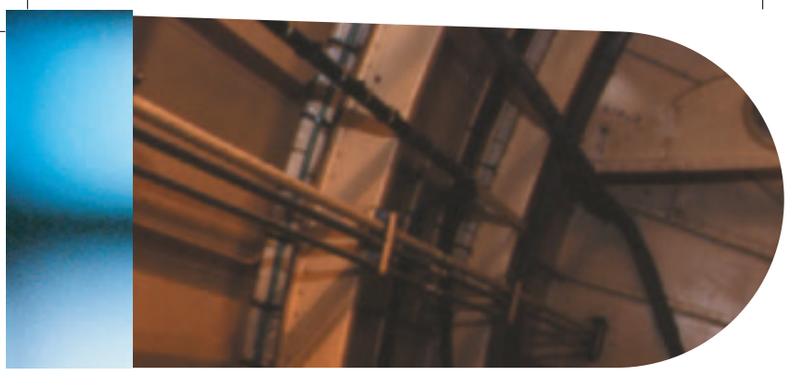
What I have learned from flying and ballooning is the importance of being in the here and now, of being fully awake and aware of what is happening. In my practice, I don't allow patients to spend dozens of sessions speaking about the past. The goal is to find solutions in the present, to use our inner resources to make progress and feel better. An important tool is hypnosis, which is a way of helping the patient connect with his or her inner self in the present moment.

How can that "inner self" help us find solutions?

That is where we find our strength, creativity, imagination, confidence and a fresh way to deal with emotions. My therapies are based on the realization that the outer world is never really safe. Life is unpredictable and sometimes dangerous. The only real safety we can gain is from the inside. This inner safety can be achieved by coming into contact with our deepest self. I believe that human beings today try to be too much like computers. We get the inputs from life and we always have the same output, the same attitudes and reactions. We live on autopilot. When you connect to your self, you have the ability to be much more aware, more conscious. I compare going around the world in a balloon to living a conscious life. You encounter favorable and unfavorable winds, thunderstorms, technical problems, physical and mental hardship. All these

Family of adventurers

Bertrand Piccard's grandfather, Auguste (1884-1962), invented the pressurized capsule and the stratospheric balloon, paving the way for space flight. Using the same principles, he invented the bathyscaphe to explore the depths of the ocean. Professor of Physics in Zurich and Brussels, he was a friend of both Albert Einstein and Marie Curie. The archetypal scientist, Auguste Piccard was the inspiration for Professor Calculus in the works of Belgian cartoonist Hergé. Bertrand's father, Jacques, took the bathyscaphe to the deepest point in the ocean, reaching a record depth of 10,916 meters, and researched the Gulf Stream. Bertrand spent part of his childhood in Cape Canaveral, Florida. There he was befriended by rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun, who invited him to see the launches of Apollo 7-12 and introduced him to Charles Lindbergh and NASA astronauts. Before becoming a balloonist, he mastered hang-gliding, parachuting and ultralight planes. Born in 1958, Bertrand Piccard studied medicine and psychiatry, establishing a practice in Lausanne. He is married and has three daughters.



stimuli force you to use new resources and new tools within you to grow and develop. The balloon flight was a historical event, but it is also a metaphor for life.

What are the greatest obstacles to realizing one's potential?

The fear of the unknown and the fear of losing control. Many people base their lives on the search for certainties and control. They are unable to make an adventure out of their life, because they fight against everything that happens. People hate to change, but how can you evolve if you have no change? Use the unpredictable to find new opportunities.

Isn't it exhausting to live constantly on the edge of the unknown?

No, I think it's exhausting to try to control everything, to swim against the stream, to grab onto a rock at the edge of the river and fight against the flow. Life is sometimes painful and cruel, but if you let yourself go with the flow, it is still easier to deal with. It's like the wind. How can you go around the world if you go against the wind?

How can people apply this to their everyday lives?

All the situations that we cannot control have the power to change us, to make us more aware, more effective. Take the example of Serono. What is your company's strength? It is the research department that develops new medications and pushes into new scientific frontiers. If you had certainties, you wouldn't need research. If you were producing common and well-known medications, you would never have become such a big company. The unknown is the stimulation. You seek to discover, to explore, to understand.

During your flight in 1999 you broadcast messages of peace from the International Olympic Committee. What would your message be today?

Wars and terrorism are caused by injustice, by refusing to understand the mentality of others. Today, one quarter of the world has everything and three quarters have nothing. In the long run, programs to address this imbalance will be more effective than military actions. The West should be doing more for education and health in the developing countries, giving access to new technologies and reducing the injustice in our political relations. Our current way of life is not sustainable in a political or environmental sense. Every hour, we are burning the equivalent of one million tons of oil, which took millions of years to create. This shows a lack of knowledge and respect for the way nature works. Technology is here to help us. But it has to be used in more sustainable ways. We need to find more equilibrium in the economic and social development of our planet. This is the greatest challenge facing humankind.

What is the role of private companies in facing this challenge?

Private companies can have a great deal of influence. In the past that has usually been in the direction of short-term profits. Their responsibility is now to push in the direction of sustainable development. They can help us awaken the public to the need to change our priorities, and that will result in the election of political leaders who think in more global terms.

What do you do as a goodwill ambassador of the United Nations?

For the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the role of the goodwill ambassador **(www.unfpa.org/modules/goodwill/index.html)** is to raise the level of awareness about the needs of the developing world in terms of education, health and human rights, especially the rights of women. We speak to the media and the politicians in our countries and go out into the developing world to evaluate the programs and talk to local leaders. There is a new logic, a new measure of leadership today. It is not based on power or wealth, but on understanding and addressing human suffering.

Why did you establish the foundation "Winds of Hope"?

In my role with the UN, I am a small part of a global program that involves many people. "Winds of Hope" (www.windsofhope.org) was created specifically by the team of Breitling Orbiter 3 to draw attention to forgotten illnesses such as noma, a form of gangrene that disfigures and maims as many as 100,000 people per year, many of whom are children. For my participation in this interview, Serono is making a generous contribution to the Winds of Hope. •

Social responsibility

Serono employees taking part in pre-ESHRE heard Bertrand Piccard give a captivating account of his journey and outlook on life in the Théâtre Pitoëff in Geneva on June 30. "I am convinced that people who have achieved a measure of fame must use it to build a better world, instead of just for personal gain," states Mr. Piccard, who is a goodwill ambassador for the UN and co-founder of the charity "Winds of Hope" (www.windsofhope.org). He believes that private companies have a vital role to play in encouraging sustainable economic and social development around the world. Serono has expressed its social responsibility by supporting numerous employee-driven initiatives to raise money for local charities (see e.g. "swim for hope" in Paradigm No. 8). These grass-roots efforts will soon be supplemented by an ambitious international campaign at the Corporate level on behalf of "Mission Antarctica," a program to clean up and recycle tons of waste from one of our planet's last true wildernesses (see also p. 34 of this issue).

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