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This is a Nestlé translation of the personal interview with Peter Brabeck-Letmathe who spoke to the Swiss French magazine L'illustré about keeping active.

"I don't want to think about my illness"

Are you going on holiday this summer or are you the kind of boss who never switches off?

I took five days' holiday at the beginning of July to go to Ibiza where I have a house. My grandchildren, who live in Peru, came along. I'm like anyone else: I take holidays. But I am totally committed to my work, just like when I was selling ice cream, almost fifty years ago.

Are you nostalgic about that time in your life?

I was in Austria a few weeks ago to celebrate Nestlé Austria's 130th anniversary. During the celebrations someone said to me: "You started off here selling ice cream; back then, what was your life like?" I replied that it was one of the happiest times of my life. I was independent. The weather was fantastic and I spent my days outdoors. There were lots of lakes in the area and sometimes I would stop my van and take a dip.

And here you can see the lake from your windows.

And of course I swim there too! But not in the middle of the day; usually in the evening or early morning.

How old were you?

I must have been about 23. After studying economics I went on a five-month expedition to the Hindu Kush. When I returned I contemplated studying for a PhD, but in the end I decided to get a job. I particularly wanted an opportunity to go to Latin America. I was passionate about Latin America. First of all because there are some beautiful mountains there, and then because I was attracted by Latin American culture.

Are you still as passionate about it?

Absolutely. I am married to a Chilean and my three children, two boys and a girl, were born in Chile. At home we speak Spanish. And I have lots of friends in Latin America.

Are you a workaholic? What time do you arrive at the office?

- I usually arrive at 8 and leave around 7 or 7.30. But this morning I was at the CHUV, the University Hospital of Lausanne, where I am having treatment until next February.

Do you still do mountain climbing?

Yes, but I would love to have the time to do more of it. You could say the mountains are in my blood. My parents were mountain people. At the age of two I was carried around in a backpack. Back then there were no ski lifts so one just had to hike up. At three I was already skiing, and by the time I was six I was ski touring on skins. And later, rock climbing I live in a chalet in Verbier, not right in the village, but 200 metres higher up. For me, Verbier is like a town! (chuckles)

You are also a helicopter pilot.

I have held a private pilot licence to fly aeroplanes for a long time and am currently doing a helicopter pilot course in Sion. It's my new passion. I only recently began. I want to pass the theoretical part in the next few weeks, and I'm probably about 20% through the practical. So there's still work to be done!

Is the pleasure you get from flying a helicopter different to what you feel when flying an aeroplane?

It's completely different. I was surprised by the difference. A helicopter has no stability. You have to pay attention all the time; it's very sensitive. That's what makes it so interesting.

Is it a new challenge?

Yes, when I was diagnosed with a medical condition in February, I decided I should find a new activity to take my mind off it.

Rumour has it that you have a rare illness.

Fortunately it's an illness that's curable. The treatment is fairly aggressive, but it's relatively short, around six months. Already I'm more than half way through it.

Is it going well?

I came back this morning from my latest check-up. The results show that everything is going according to plan, so I'm very pleased.

What is this illness? A type of cancer?

I don't even know what it's called. And quite honestly, nor am I interested. When my doctor told me I was ill, we simply discussed the options. I asked him two questions: what will happen if I do nothing? His answer was: "In six months you will no longer be around." So that was not a solution. My second question was: "Can something be done?" To which he replied: "Yes, it's curable and the chances of getting better are very high." So I said to him: "Let's go for it." That's all I asked him. He's the specialist! I'm very pleased with the hospital. I've been astounded by the quality of the care and how kind the people are there.

Is the helicopter a way of thumbing your nose at the illness?

Yes, I said to myself: "I've six months of treatment ahead and in the meantime I'm going to get my helicopter pilot licence." When you're busy, your mind automatically focuses on what you're doing and forgets there's a problem. When I go to the hospital, I take my helicopter manual and I put my mind to that. I don't have my mind on the treatment. I forget all about the illness.

The financial markets on the other hand have paid a lot of attention to your illness.

At first they did, but they stopped right away when they saw that nothing was happening. It was just after that that I bought an aeroplane that doesn't even exist yet. It's the new Pilatus, which will be making its appearance in Stans on the first of August. I'll be taking delivery of it in September 2017. I would never have bought an aeroplane if I feared I wouldn't still be in the land of the living in 2017! (laughs)

Do you get the feeling that people look at you differently now?

They don't because I don't let them. It's very important in order to get better. If you start to see yourself as being ill, you risk digging your own grave. When I had to tell the company I had a health problem, I immediately told them that I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I received hundreds of letters and texts from all over but my reply was always the same. "Thank you. I'm in good hands, I continue to lead a normal private and professional life, and in six months it will be history."

Illness is the fear of dying, the fear of growing weaker. Are you fearful?

I must admit that this illness really took me by surprise. In December I had a thorough check-up. And I was congratulated on my good health: top marks! On the twelfth of December I was declared the healthiest man in the world. And six weeks later I was told: "If you do nothing you have only six months to live." It is rather surprising, is it not? (laughs) The illness developed in the space of six weeks.

Do you think about death?

Death, when you climb mountains as I do, is part of life. I lost my two best friends on an expedition in 1967. I have been accompanied by death all my life. It doesn't just exist when you are ill, you risk your life every moment of your existence. Take the case of Michaël Schumacher for instance. That's life!

As the boss of Nestlé, you embody a sort of omnipotence. Has this omnipotence been diminished by the illness?

This idea of omnipotence has nothing to do with reality. You are confronted by the limits of your power from morning to night. It starts when you open the paper and read articles that you don't like. You talk to politicians, you look at what is happening around you, and there are limits absolutely everywhere. And if you still need to find out what your limits are, you walk through your own front door and the power stops right there! (chuckles)

You are, nevertheless, in a position of power vis-à-vis other economic and political players.

I found, for example, that the Minder initiative was not a good thing and that it was actually bad for Switzerland, but could I prevent it from happening? No! When I dared to say, just once, that it was not a good thing, they said, in public: "That arrogant Austrian should shut up!" So where is the power?

When you travel, are you greeted like a head of State?

In Ibiza, for instance, they don't even know who I am, which is just fine by me. I don't want to be recognised. I have no bodyguards. Last year I took the train to Ulan Bator, a normal train, and I went to Moscow alone. Five days and five nights. And when I go ski touring with my friends I sleep in a cabin, in a dormitory. There's a huge difference between the image and reality.

Can you imagine what life after Nestlé will be like?

I'm 70 years old and I'm going to retire in April 2017. In May 2017 I will also leave the Board of Directors of oil company Exxon in Dallas, the world's largest corporation. And I will immediately start training to fly my new aeroplane, the Pilatus, that will be arriving in September 2017.

Will your life always be so dynamic?

I will make it so dynamic! The mountains will always be there! I also have a busy personal life, managed now by my wife and my son. We are very active in the property market, in Switzerland but also in Ibiza. I have some hotel projects too, as well as some fish breeding projects in Switzerland. My head is brimming with ideas!