

# “Rituals help us get a better handle on life.”

Interview — Bruno Affentranger

Trend analyst and former CEO of the Swiss Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute, David Bosshart, on unstable times, reckless behaviour in our part of the world and why all this can still be an opportunity for the prevention cause.

**The study “Prevention in transition. Stable routines in unstable times”, explores health-promoting behaviours. Are we humans creatures of habit?**

*David Bosshart:* Yes, we tend to repeat and imitate our behaviour. But since industrialization and the accelerated technologization of everyday life, all the behaviours we are familiar with have gradually been turned on their heads. Things that went without saying – how we went about our daily lives, breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner – were completely ritualized. In other words, we no longer had to think

about them and just did them automatically. Our eating habits were driven by the parameters set by religion. We ate fish on Friday. Too much meat was not only unhealthy, but also too expensive and a luxury commodity. Frugality was the order of the day, people didn't overeat and didn't throw away bread. Technology-driven prosperity, individualization and personalization have swept aside all these rituals.

**So it wasn't even necessary for people to self-regulate back then?**

In the 20th century, there was still a shortage of goods and products. We had no opportunity to be wasteful with resources such as food. It is the insanity of the 20th century that we in the rich world have managed to avoid famine while at the same time reckless behaviour has become rampant. Everyone tends to do what they want.

**What does this mean when applied to the history of oral hygiene?**

The 20th century saw a breakthrough. Today, everyone knows that they should brush their teeth at least twice a day. This has had an incredibly

powerful effect on public health. The automation of rituals makes people's day-to-day lives easier. They help us get a better handle on life. A lack of rituals means a lack of certainties. During the Covid pandemic, we were bombarded with new information on a daily basis – as de-ritualized people, this has made us even more insecure. The Covid pandemic stands as a lesson in itself.

**In what way?**

Compared to conformist societies such as Japan, our Swiss society is much less equipped to act quickly and efficiently. In Japan, people wear face masks out of politeness when they have a cold, which is also a ritual. They avoid being in spaces where there are a lot of people. We, on the other hand, live a life of individualization and personalization, in which everyone does as they please and no one does what they should. In the end, everyone knows what they cannot do.

**Did religion ritually domesticate us with its commandments, and is that what is lacking today? Is there a substitute for this?**

We humans have become more and more free. Freedom is often confused with independence. Freedom can only



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be understood in relation to the people I live with. The more liberalized the rules are and the freer I am as a result, the more I need discipline and willpower in my dealings with other people. This is obviously difficult and made more difficult by advancing mechanization.

#### **Why is that?**

Algorithms are very powerful. If my mobile phone knows that I always have a craving for something sweet at 4 pm, it will show me an offer for a snack at exactly the right time. At some point, in the middle of a deep glucose trough and with no willpower, I will get an offer to order a pizza – that's what I call seducing and manipulating people with new behaviours. As a counterbalance, the individualized and personalized world needs even more discipline and willpower.

**In the GDI study “Prevention in transition. Stable routines in unstable times”, the authors write that human self-empowerment will become increasingly important. This self-empowerment requires self-regulation. People must be able to manage their lives in a reasonably self-determined manner and in order to do so, they must recognize what is happening. Asking this of people is huge. Most people can't achieve it. Many can't afford it either. This is supported by the fact that we have more and more laws. They help us.**

That's true. And Migros founder Gottlieb Duttweiler, aptly said: “Voluntariness is the price of freedom.” Since we live in a society in which there are many loners, families without offspring or only children, the question arises as to what is happening in another area, specifically the transfer of knowledge and values. In China, we see a society with authoritarian values and a strong emphasis on experience and age. Let me come back to nutrition, which is simply the best way to illustrate developments. This is my primary focus.

#### **Please do.**

My grandmother bred chickens, slaughtered and plucked them herself.

She knew how to properly handle and prepare a chicken for her family. Her daughter, my mother, bought chicken thighs from the supermarket. My grandmother's grandchildren bought ready-made chicken sandwiches from a convenience store. At best, the great-grandchildren know how many calories a sandwich contains and whether it is vegan. As you can see: knowledge has become honed and specialized. It has no longer developed in a ritualized overall context.

**According to the study, factors such as mental health, social environment, education level, income, age and gender reinforce or facilitate health-promoting behaviour. Is that surprising?**

Yes and no. The list is correct. But I'd like to come back to the question already posed by other people: “Programmed or be programmed” – which is true? Do I decide with my own free will or do I allow myself to be programmed, guided and directed by the machine because it's convenient?

**Do you think that machines will take over the ritualization of our lives one day?**

Machines are already structuring our everyday lives. We already live most of our life based on software programmes without even realizing it. It's an irony of history. During and after the 1968 movement, people tried to dismantle rituals. Now they have been replaced by more powerful and appealing, algorithmically generated rituals. This programming is unique. We have constantly implemented what is technically possible, step by step. Nevertheless, people seem to mistrust advancing mechanization.

**Why do you think that is?**

The Covid pandemic in particular has demonstrated how widespread a critical attitude towards tracking and exploiting technical traces is. In our part of the world, enthusiasm for data protection predominates. It outweighs the belief in the usefulness of data. We are physical human with a guarded attitude towards a disembodied, digital

world. This disembodied world functions in a calculated fashion, based on probability calculations, statistics and behavioural measurements. The aim of artificial intelligence is to be able to predict human behaviour more accurately.

**How do health-promoting behaviours – rituals – relate to prevention?**

Prevention is already very strongly predetermined. Humans have an incredibly strong, robust and resilient survival instinct. However, just as with farm animals, we humans have reached a high level of breeding. Today we realize that our robustness is less robust than we originally thought. We are looking for ways out and are turning to organic and locally produced food in the pursuit of greater transparency and safety. We want to live healthier and, above all, longer lives, and we know that we can better achieve this with certain preventive measures.

**Nevertheless, the number of people who are taking less exercise and generally adopting unhealthier behaviour has risen, especially during the pandemic.**

Willpower, free will, is lacking or being overridden by the convenience of working from home with less exercise. None of this is conducive to adaptability.

**Are we entering an age of prevention – or is that too optimistic a view?**

The most important starting point today is prevention and health promotion. From an economic point of view, however, this is not yet a reality. The revenues per square meter in medicine are no doubt at their highest where repairs are carried out and not where preventive care is provided.

**Medical and repair services also yield higher margins.**

We shouldn't ignore this economic reality. Keynes already said that everything that is invested in the comparatively distant future is discounted at a high interest rate. Translated, this means that it is practically impossible to get a 20- or 25-year-old to start thinking about their pension fund.



Two years before retirement, people start looking at what they can expect. It is enormously challenging to reward long-term thinking in a society that knows no scarcity and only immediate availability in such a way that people will actually reflect on it.

**We are physical and not digitalized beings – if we were just about the maths, we would already be acting in a more preventive manner.**

That is true. But this physicality is also being eroded. We are in the midst of the transition from the chemical to the biological age – this is particularly evident in agriculture– and we will perform biological manipulations that we still balk at today.

**Today, preventive measures account for a maximum of three percent of total health expenditure in this country. How are we supposed to achieve a target of thirty to fifty percent?**

This is a question for civil society. What do we want? The East Asian countries are moving in this direction. Switzerland, on the other hand, looks at what its neighbour is doing – and is then bound to do it differently. The dogged individualism in Switzerland is in competition with the joint efforts that we need to address or promote pensions, healthcare, energy policy. We know that we should be facing this head on, but we are not doing so. The question will be: What do we tackle together and by choice and what will only happen through coercion?

**Which brings us back to our initial topic of freedom.**

We firmly believe that people should be empowered as far as possible. What happens voluntarily and of our own accord is always more stable than what is brought about through coercion.

**Is this self-empowerment a delusion; something that does not exist?**

We are driven by the belief that we will be able to coexist happily together in a free world in the future. With mutual respect and keeping public costs to a minimum.

The optimistically set-out self-regulation and empowerment of human beings in the study collides with a complete handover of private matters to the state, which in turn promises and endlessly funds services.

We live in a world of experts. This was already apparent in the industrial world of the 1950s to 1980s. But in the age of digitalisation, which is moving ever further towards extremes such as exponentiality, this has become many times more acute. The need for experts is greater than ever. They may not make the world safer, but they can advise us and keep us informed about the latest scientific developments. At the same time, the risk level is increasing because we are more interconnected and live in a globalized world with complex flows of goods, logistics and finance.

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In this world, the pressure to regulate more is increasing – we want to regain control of that which we cannot grasp. So far, we have seen this happening in the world of finance. Over the next few years, the food sector will see stronger regulation – for instance in the way we deal with sugar. We are leaving behind the old rituals and a shared world. We are reassembling them in an abstract sphere and driven by algorithms.

**This is the perfect description of the death of the liberal world.**

Even today's liberals are writing that the liberal world is finished. Yuval Noah Harari put it succinctly: if we recognize that free will and thus the autonomous subject do not exist, then

the liberal world is dead. But we can think in Kantian terms: we have intelligence, we have incredible brain power, visions, ideas, prototypes, we can control the world in many ways. But in the end we lack the will. As Kant put it: “Humankind is endowed with reason, but is made of crooked timber.” The last question pertains to the image of humankind.

**Are we heading back to the pre-Enlightenment world, back to self-imposed immaturity?**

This is the path we are on. There has never been a linear development, but rather always the hope that things will get better at some point. People need hope and faith. Without them there is no survival. Today we live in a world in which the polarities of hope and fear reign. In Germany, for example, fear is more prevalent. That's a bad thing.

**This brings us to a quasi-religious discussion.**

We no longer need to discuss religious denominations. What do we believe in? What do the markets believe in? In VW or in Tesla? People who believe in VW believe that a car is essentially a hardware product. Those who believe in Tesla believe in software products – and everything will turn out fine at some point. The markets provide the answer. People make them, they believe in Tesla. But that can change.

**Who will determine what proper health is in the future?**

A look at the megatrends points to growing health awareness. But just as with tangible or intangible affluence, we cannot identify a benchmark for an appropriate measurement. There is no consensus on whether living for as long as possible is the most important factor. Incidentally, this is what our current healthcare system is based on; that people should live as long as possible. But although we know that we can undertake anything from the age of 75, our quality of life will never be the same as before. (Emanuel Ezequiel: “Why I hope to die at 75”). Can we put a price on life? Can we even talk about a worth of 10 million dollars, as US scientists have calculated? These are philosophical questions that we cannot answer.