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BONUS MINI-ISSUE: HIGHLIGHTS FROM TED2014

As many Honeybee readers know, I've found the TED ecosystem to be a wonderful resource for all sorts of interesting ideas over time, from the highly technical to the deeply human (and sometimes both at once). A number of themes from this year's gathering will surely loop back to inform more complete Honeybee explorations over time, but in the meantime here is the short list of my top 10 talks. They are not all up for viewing on the [TED website](#) yet, but should be added quickly, and you can put yourself on their email list if you want to be notified of new postings as they occur.

This year was TED's 30th anniversary, with the theme of "The Next Chapter". In addition to terrific new ideas and speakers, a large group of favorite past speakers was invited back, which provided a backdrop that felt like a sort of greatest hits mixtape (that's a compliment).

Here I've highlighted some mega-themes, some favorite quotes, and my picks for top talks of the session. For those of you who follow this gathering closely, you'll notice that what's not here is a long recap of the [Edward Snowden/NSA](#) sessions, which were captivating and are exceptionally well-documented elsewhere. Aside from all of the important public debate, this session raised for me the question of exile and connection – there was Snowden, clear as day (clearer than the NSA guy, in fact). Though completely disconnected in some ways, he is completely connected in others. This is a very new possibility in our world, and it seems it might have some interesting impact in completely different circumstances than these.

TOP QUOTES:

(Yes, there are many).

We may not know all the answers, but at least we know how to ask the questions.
- Andrew Connolly, Astronomer

I designed my future by daydreaming it... creativity is daydreaming, actualized.
- Aimee Mullins

Data can make a good design great, but it will never make a bad design good.
- Margaret Gould Stewart, Facebook

We have all the money in the world... but we don't have time.
- Allan Savory

People ask, what did I do, to have such a strong daughter? It's what I did not do. I did not clip her wings.
- Ziauddin Yousafzai (father of Malala – see his talk at <http://on.ted.com/rl4u>)

I want to make the world a better place.

- Gabby Giffords

Models are always wrong – always. But they are skillful if they give you more information than you'd otherwise have.

- Gavin Schmidt, climate scientist

Tools need not dictate form.

- Matthew Carter, type designer

We can endure great pain if we think it's purposeful... if you banish the dragons, you banish the heroes.

- Andrew Solomon

Your human genome is 99% the same as your neighbor's, but your microbial genome is 90% different.

- Rob Knight, Microbial ecologist

Education is what others do to you – learning is what you do to yourself.

- Joi Ito

We're going the wrong way with all these apps – you want the chicken in the oven, not the oven on your phone.

- Nicholas Negroponte

You can't think about thinking unless you're thinking about thinking about something.

- Seymour Papert, quoted by Negroponte

It's great to let go – I should have started sooner.

- Isabel Allende

Well, he's big on delegation.

- Bill Gates on Warren Buffett's mega-donation to the Gates Foundation

When will we think it's weird to look around the table at the board meeting and see all white men?

- Mellody Hobson

As a scientist, I want to connect with wonder.

- Sara Lewis, Firefly researcher

In service like the military, we honor those who sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others. But in business, we often honor those who benefit themselves by sacrificing others.

- Simon Sinek

Play one note that's worth hearing.

- Seth Godin

In a mediocre world (neither 100% full nor 100% empty), our choices matter.

- Jim Holt

Let me be crystal clear – vaccines do not cause autism.

- Wendy Chung, Geneticist and head of clinical research at Symons Foundation Autism Research Initiative

Variable does not mean unpredictable.

- Amory Lovins, on big misperception in renewable energy

Well, the simple way to solve problems in education is to stop causing them.

- Sir Ken Robinson

Brands can't fail - artists have a duty to fail. Brands reflect their world - artists transform it.

- JR

We are wired to solve.

- David Kwong

Invention is not enough – I look for additionality. What can I do with this new thing that I could not do before? I felt guilty working on Android, it was so small. But that was stupid – Android was the future.

- Larry Page

You cant just hijack nostalgia. There has to be something fresh.

- Mark Ronson

THREE KEY THEMES:

1) WHO'S IN CHARGE?

This unsettling question ran strongly through this year's gathering (at least for me). Of course the NSA discussions highlighted some elements, but for me the idea of radical openness can be just as unsettling as radical secrecy. [Planet Labs](#) is deploying tiny satellites with a commitment to open data on every inch of the earth, every day. And the [Large Synoptic Survey Telescope](#) is doing the same thing in the other direction, with open data and images of our universe. I applauded as loudly as anyone else in the audience for these ideas, but then I started thinking, do I really want everyone to be able to see if I planted some new trees, or replaced my roof? And the bigger questions cut both ways – yes, we can see hostile forces assembling, but we can also see rescue teams approaching a pirated ship. I am not so sure that “all open” solves all of the problems of “all closed” – though it is probably better than “highest bidder”.

The [business and investing implications](#) of mega data (discussed in part in our [December issue](#)) are compounded by the fact that this increased information is coupled with increasing ability to manipulate it in a decentralized way. Both Avi Reichental (3D Systems) and Joi Ito (MIT Media Lab) referenced the idea that “complexity is free” – yet many of our traditional economic and financial models assume that complexity is costly, or risky. Perhaps we do not need centralized factories or standardized investor pie-charts nearly as much as we did 30 of 50 years ago. Perhaps we can do more, or better – or both.

On a more personal level, do you think you at least have control over your own mind, your own decisions? Think again. [David Kwong](#) performed what seemed like light entertainment, until you get to the end and realize how powerful your subconscious mind can be (proving the life's work of [Danny Kahneman](#) in 18 minutes). [Rob Knight](#) demonstrated the power of your microbiome, while [Ed Yong](#) showed the power of parasites. Watch the zombie caterpillar defend the parasite wasp eggs and you will know for certain that we all have much less volition that we'd like to imagine.

I felt the same way after these talks as I do after a long stretch of studying behavioral finance – utterly fascinated, and utterly helpless. What is the solution? As [John Steinbeck](#) would proclaim, *timshel!* -- thou mayest! free will! Of course, we do still have volition, along with ethics and judgment and emotion, and these are a good deal of what's needed to address the mega-issues above. Who gets to ask the questions? Who gets to know? Who gets to decide?

Beyond the concept of *timshel*, I have come to view my subconscious as a sort of protector god, a concept that exists in every spiritual tradition I've studied. In each case, the god is almost always looking out for the subject's best interest (though often in a violent way)... and then every once in a while goes totally off the rails. Sound familiar? This idea – subconscious as protector - allows me to think of my "system 1" as a faithful companion, rather than something to be fought (see *The Red Book* by [Carl Jung](#) for the most beautiful, painful description of this sort of battle). We talk a lot about being fearless, in sports, in business, and in life - but why would we want that? Fear is there to protect us, and usually does a bang-up job. To be *controlled* by our fears, now that's another question...

2) TIME – MAYBE TIME, NOT SPACE, IS THE FINAL FRONTIER

So much of TED is future-oriented, and this is stupendous: the boundary-blasting, mind-shifting possibilities presented at each gathering are mesmerizing, inspiring, and full of positive potential (along with the occasional freak-out moment). But after the third or fourth discussion of space and singularity this month, I found myself yearning to turn my focus towards the earth. You know, our home planet. Not "out there", but Here. Not someday, but Now.

Some of the most moving and important talks this year were focused not just on now, but on the links between now and the past. [Sting](#) talked about a mid-career crisis, when the songs would not come. He was not able to move forward with new creations until he went backward into his own past in a shipyard town. [Avi Reichental](#) discussed the massive potentials of 3-D printing, but to him, the biggest positive is that it links us back to our own abilities to create, to craft. David Brooks gave a short talk asking us whether we were crafting our resumes or our eulogies (expanding from the ideas in a [column](#) he wrote last year). Amazing character actress [Sarah Jones](#) reminded us that while we are busy building rocketships, people right here at home are suffering, and maybe they could use some attention too.

The most powerful ideas to me are the ones that link through time – past, present, and future. Without that context, without that connection, discussions of satellites and space exploration take on a tinge of desperation in my ears. When those roots in past and present are strong, they allow me to be excited about what we are running *to* – but when left un-rooted, just floating in the future, I can't help but wonder what we are running *from*.

In business and investing contexts, these same links are vital. We've all seen the roadshow where the product idea is brilliant, but there is no business model – not now, not ever. (Seen any lately? I bet you have.) Whenever I see those proposals, Page's idea of additionality comes to mind (see below) – what does this product do that is of use? My mother also comes to mind,

with the mantra, “just because you *can* do something, doesn’t mean you should.” As we seek newness and progress, many new ventures, from product inventions to alternative market creations, are primarily defined as “not that”. But to really thrive, at some point those same ventures need to offer “not that...but this instead”. Without somehow linking past, present, and future, it’s impossible to create a “this” that will be of benefit.

As we explore bold new frontiers, we need to be running *to* something better - not just running away.

3) CREATION, RE-CREATION, OR JUST STEALING?

Another mega-theme at TED is one of innovation and creation, and this year’s gathering brought terrific insights on this front. For me the main question raised was, when is copying, sampling, and referencing part of a wonderful new creation, and when is it just laziness, or stealing? (It is not lost on me that my own work often has a collage-like element to it, so these issues hit close to home).

Central to this distinction – creation or theft? – was [Mark Ronson](#)’s review of music sampling (turns out, I had never heard the original LaDiDaDi, only many re-uses over the years... who knew?). Ronson’s audio clips gave the perfect example of “you know it when you see (hear) it” principle: some samples are obviously just cheap cut-and-paste jobs, while others are integral ingredients of something totally new. To cap off his own talk, Ronson sampled from a long list of prior TED talks, proving his point more elegantly than words alone could ever do.

Architect [Marc Kushner](#) illuminated some similar issues in our built environment, where he described a pendulum of architecture swinging from safe copy-cattng to extreme experimentation over long stretches of time. With digital tools, Kushner argues that the pendulum has sped up, so that renderings of buildings are “real” long before the projects are actually built. At this point there is no need for the drama of the extremes, which were more a result of reaction than creation: the pendulum is vibrating near the center instead of swinging wildly side to side. It’s not clear whether this will result in a more efficient creative process, or a better one, as both extra-safe and extra-crazy extremes are cut off.

At the other end of the spectrum – the decidedly non-built environment - was discussion of virtual reality tools, like Google Glass or the just-bought [just-bought Oculus](#). [Chris Kluwe](#), former NFL kicker, discussed the migration from virtual reality to augmented reality, which moves us from “just like being there” to something much more interesting. Though some of the more immediate commercial applications – like being on the field in an NFL game – strike me more as the less-inspiring type of sampling, Kluwe also outlined some groundbreaking ideas around virtual reality, empathy and human connection. If you really could feel the impact of bullying, for example, or really experience the wonder of the ocean from a landlocked state, what possibilities might open up?

The gadgets related to virtual reality are certainly in the “shiny new toy” category, but newness alone is not enough – there is also the central concept of **additionality**. [Larry Page](#) from Google discussed this in conversation with Charlie Rose – the idea that mere invention is not that interesting. The question is, *what can I do now that I could not do before?* He recalled feeling guilty for working on Android, because it was such a tiny piece of Google early on – but Android has enabled so much that could not be done before! He concluded, “that was stupid (to worry). Android was the future.” [Bill & Melinda Gates](#) made a similar point, noting that that invention of a new vaccine does not mean lives will be saved. To gain that real additionality, we need supply chain, cultural acceptance, funding – a long list of other enablers.

In business and investing contexts, there are two elements here that are especially relevant. First, these developments mean that **shallow invention will not be valued**. Launching a product where you've just changed the color is not fooling anyone; neither is launching an investment fund that does the exact thing as the last ten offerings, or one that just bundles up slices of other funds and charges higher fees. We are seeing sampling and repurposing in so many areas of life that the lame results are easier and easier to distinguish from the ones that represent real creativity and progress.

Second, we are in the midst of a **decline of false authority**. The idea that clients will be intimidated by their architect (or their financial advisor) in an era where tools and knowledge are more available to all is clearly a thing of the past. There are two options for specialists in these sorts of arenas: 1) provide real collaborative, personalized service, or 2) do something genuinely new and valuable. Just lording arcane knowledge and specialized buzzwords over others is not going to cut it. To paraphrase Warren Buffett, the tide is going out and we will soon be able to see who's wearing shorts. Thank goodness for that.

TOP TEN TALKS:

Where videos are already available I've linked to them; otherwise the links are to the excellent TED blog coverage, more complete than I could ever provide.

WHO: JOI ITO, Director of the MIT Media Lab

WHY: He is in the center of all things tech-y, but his mind is on humanity

- Deploy or die
- Learning over education
- Pull over push
- Now-ist over futurist
- Compass over maps
- Blog coverage: <http://wp.me/p10512-n4h>

WHO: Simon Sinek, Leadership expert

WHY: He dared to speak of fear in business

- Leadership is not the same as authority.
- FEAR – if there is fear within your organization, all of the energy goes towards self-defense. If there is safety within your organization, all of that energy can go toward more productive ends.
- Great leaders would never sacrifice the people for the numbers.
- Blog coverage: <http://wp.me/p10512-mli>

WHO: CHRIS HADFIELD, Astronaut

WHY: He dared to speak of fear in space

- How you deal with FEAR versus DANGER?
- Hadfield's talk reminded me of a teaching from Tsoknyi Rinpoche: "Your fear is real, but it often is not true."
- Video: <http://on.ted.com/a05P5>

WHO: DEL HARVEY, Twitter

WHY: She is the first person to ever make me feel better about internet security.

- You know what makes my job challenging? People do weird things.
- Some people visualize world peace...I visualize catastrophe.
- Twitter has 500m tweets/day – so a 1/million chance is 500 every day.
- Video: <http://on.ted.com/e06AP>

WHO: MELLODY HOBSON, Ariel Investments

WHY: Because I thought she was going to talk about investing, and she talked about something much more important instead.

- When will we think it's weird to look around at the board meeting and see all white men?
- How can we go from color blind to color brave?
- Blog coverage: <http://wp.me/p10512-n0D>

WHO: ELIZABETH GILBERT, Writer

WHY: Because she is honest about success, and about failure.

- There's an absolute value element to strong emotion – extreme success feels a lot like extreme failure
- Writing is home to me- I kept going even when failing, because I loved writing more than I hated failing. [Where is your home?](#)
- Blog coverage: <http://wp.me/p10512-mHU>

WHO: AVI REICHENTAL, CEO of 3D Systems

WHY: He sees the connection between the future and the past

- With hyper local manufacturing, “complexity is free” – all of the precepts of the factory system are turned on their head (Joi Ito echoed this too). Woah.
- 3D printing is not going to catapult us into the future – it is going to connect us with our own heritage. His grandfather was a cobbler... “now I am a cobbler too”.
- Do not just ask, what can I make? Ask, how can this change my life?
- Blog coverage: <http://wp.me/p10512-mHm>

WHO: HUGH HERR, Biohybrid Prostheticist

WHY: Terrific bionics talk, with the best demo of all time at the end.

- Just watch it: <http://on.ted.com/e06AN>

WHO: ED YONG, Science Writer

WHY: Amazing content, masterful delivery.

- Think you control yourself? Look at these parasites and wonder...
- A zombie caterpillar carcass controlled by the hatched wasp larvae within
- A cricket forced into the water so that the worm inside can wriggle out
- A tapeworm that hijacks shrimp and steers them towards flamingos, the worm's ultimate goal
- “It's a classic case of eat, prey, love”
- Video: <http://on.ted.com/slLb>

WHO: ALL OF NATURE

WHY: It's just so amazing.

I am calling editor's privilege with my #10 and highlighting a whole group of terrific talks that emphasized the natural world:

DEBORAH GORDON, Ant biologist

- What can we learn from ants about process management?
- Think about operating costs – in the desert, costs to forage are high – so the default is caution. Ants go slow until it's clear that something good is happening. Conversely, in the jungle, costs to forage are low, so the default is speed. But competition is high – so in the jungle ants go fast until it's clear that something bad is happening.
- My notes - this sounds just like traditional heavy manufacturing versus software deployment, right? So much more to say here...

FRANS LANTING, Stunning animal photographs

- A continuation of his [earlier work](#) documenting our incredible fellow creatures.

LOUIE SCHWARTZBERG, Stunning video footage

- His [earlier work](#) illuminated the wonders of pollination and links between nature and gratitude; now he's filming at nanoscale.

NEAT NEW SITES TO EXPLORE:

- Randall Munroe's [xkcd.com](#)- so you can see what all the MIT kids are laughing at.
- Ed Yong's [Not Exactly Rocket Science](#) blog, which is still closer to rocket science than I will ever be.
- The [General Fusion](#) site, partly because of wicked cool content, and also because Michael Laberge took his midlife crisis and turned it into a fusion company. So much better than a sportscar.
- Google's "Search On" stories, like [this one](#) – shameless propaganda? Maybe. But they also make some of the most powerful cases for technology that I've ever seen.

SECRET BONUS SECTION: *a few of my all-time favorite TED talks.*

[Mark Bezos - Volunteer Firefighter](#)

[Louie Schwartzberg - Pollination](#)

[Jill Bolte Taylor - Stroke of Insight](#)

[Eli Pariser - Filter Bubbles](#)

[Hans Rosling - Washing Machine](#)

[Jl Abrams - Mystery Box](#)