



HONEYBEE CAPITAL

HONEYBEE PUBLICATION #10

**MINI-ISSUE: HIGHLIGHTS FROM TED GLOBAL CONFERENCE
(ABRIDGED VERSION)**

July 2010

MAIN TOPIC FOR THIS PUBLICATION:

Riddle me this, how many life-altering ideas can you absorb in 5 days?

This mini-issue of Honeybee contains my own highlights from the conference – more complete proceedings can be seen at the TED website (<http://www.ted.com>), where full video of the talks is appearing daily. Our next “real” issue will be focused on the concept of risk, and especially on misperception of risk in changing circumstances.

TOP QUOTES FROM TED:

- “There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle.” Einstein
- “Playing chess is the same with plastic as with mahogany. Paperback Shakespeare is the same as leather-bound.” Amitai Etzioni, on how we have created artificial needs.
- “Power is changing – it’s not whose army wins, but whose story wins.” Joseph Nye.
- “Your mind mistakes talking for doing.” Derek Sivers, on why you should keep your weight-loss efforts to yourself.
- “The only trait that survives decapitation is vanity.” Gero Miesenbock, explaining that headless fruit flies continue grooming until they die.
- “You can’t wake someone who’s pretending to sleep.” Jason Clay, WWF* partnership executive, on why logic does not always prevail. (* = World Wildlife Fund, not wrestling. Though it’s probably true either way).
- “Complex is not the same as complicated.” Eric Berlow, on the “simplicity on the other side of complexity”.
- “There is only one life, there should only be one death – but sometimes I die 10 times in a single day.” Quote from a woman living in a warzone, relayed by Zainab Salbi, founder of Woman to Woman International.

BIG-PICTURE THEMES:

These themes were not official conference topics - they are threads that jumped out at me from the discussions. I expect to explore many of these in more depth in future Honeybee publications.

- **The challenge of definitions** – what is risk, quality, prosperity... often the root of an argument is definitional, but it is hidden under lots of assumptions and thus the discussion is mis-focused.
- **The importance of storytelling** – from individual to global context– this has been a theme in my studies at divinity school as well.
- **Three cheers for multinationals!** Several talks highlighted the need to engage with big companies, and the ways in which they can be more effective than governments, or global policies. Big shift in tone here.
- **Who gets to decide???** Lots of interesting and often thorny cases -- Wikileaks, war negotiations, supply chain safety, bribery laws.... Is there a universal 'good' or 'true', or is it more complicated than that?
- **The power of possession** – what happens when the means of production are no longer the essential asset? When information (and maybe knowledge) is ubiquitous? When stories are more powerful than armies (see above)? Several speakers noted that the work done for their PhD's could now be done in middle schools... how can we consider the different paces (and places) of innovation and their implications? What if possession is not 9/10 of the law?

TOP TALKS (in my opinion):

These are all on the TED site, or will be soon, so I am just listing with very minimal commentary here. In future Honeybee issues I'll pull more on the specific content, as we look at various topics in more depth.

- **Nic Marks, on Happiness** - Marks talked about the role of FEAR, a topic that fascinates me. Fear causes flight, not positive action. So when we are greeted with nightmarish visions -- of the environment, the economy, the stock market -- our inclination is to flee, not to engage. More is not better (as noted in the last Honeybee issue) – US productivity regarding happiness has been negative for about 40 years, as we have used more and more resources to produce less and less incremental happiness.
- **Matt Ridley, the Meeting and Mating of Ideas**. Sex is to bio-evolution as exchange is to cultural evolution (that is, trade accelerates ideas!). Cumulative advantage has accelerated as trade has accelerated. Who knows how to make a computer mouse? NO ONE. No one on earth has

this knowledge anymore – from making each component to design to assembly, including all of the activities and mechanics related to each. (A more modern version of Read’s “I, Pencil” essay from 1958 – see <http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/rdPnc11.html>).

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/matt_ridley_when_ideas_have_sex.html

- **Steven Berlin Johnson, Where Do New Ideas Come From?** Surprise – it is not that lonely moment on the mountaintop. Almost all new ideas come from some sort of social, combined effort, imagination, and dialogue – though we don’t always remember it this way.
- **Ethan Zuckerman, Imaginary Cosmopolitanism** – “the world isn’t flat, it’s extremely lumpy – it’s easier to get water from Fiji than news from Fiji”. We like the IDEA of the internet, of a connected world.... But the odds of us ever reading a Latvian newspaper online or listening to a new local band from Uganda are really pretty low. Mostly we end up in our own little bubbles. What’s needed? Translation (by people, not machines), serendipity (deejays, curators – “a guide from another flock”), and bridge figures (people who can stand with feet in different worlds, acting as connectors). Zuckerman is a very prolific blogger too, thoughtful and observant. http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/ethan_zuckerman.html
- **Elif Shafak, The Politics of Fiction** - “stories lose their magic when they are seen as more than stories... fiction is flowing water, it connects us.” I cannot do this talk justice in a summary, you should just listen to it: http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/elif_shafak_the_politics_of_fiction.html
- **David McCandless, Information is Beautiful** – this is the book I am most excited to read post-conference: McCandless has a sort of Tufte-esque view of data and its presentation. More to follow in a book review! http://www.amazon.com/Information-Beautiful-David-McCandless/dp/0007294662/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280413971&sr=8-1
- **Sheena Iyengar, Choice is Not Always Good** – Americans especially value choice, but this is NOT a universal sentiment. In her research, Anglo-American kids did better when they chose their own activities, but Asian-American kids did better when told their mothers chose the activities (lots of other research, with equally eyebrow-raising results). Americans are trained to see very tiny differences from a very early age, and choices are seen in the US as a key way to establish personal identity (there’s a reason for those Starbucks “she’s a double-shot skinny caramel macchiato” ads) – sometimes these tendencies are helpful, but often they are not. Oddly, Americans value choice even when it makes us sadder, or worse off. http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/sheena_iyengar_on_the_art_of_choosing.html
- **Tan Le, Emotive Systems** – if you want the big ‘wow’ you can skip to the end, where a subject moves an object with his mind. Yep, really. But what is even more interesting is looking at the breakthroughs needed to enable it

– they figured out how to map the un-crinkled-up brain, for example, so that activity could be measured accurately and easily from person to person. And they developed a simple headphone-like gadget to do the measurement, instead of hooking up a thousand individual electrodes to your shaved head. Who knows what else they can do???

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/tan_le_a_headset_that_reads_your_brain_waves.html

- **Neil Gershenfeld, MIT Center for Bits and Atoms** – this was not as flashy as some of the other tech-y talks, but it may have been the most thought-provoking. “MIT will be obsolete in the not-too-distant future”. Way back when, data was separated from computing – this has led to a scaling effect in technology that is really different than scaling in nature. In tech, scaling can be lumpy, and it uses energy even when dormant... whereas in nature, energy is directly related to use/production. His work is focused on the idea that you can GROW tech instead of MANUFACTURING it – so that the computing and the data are re-integrated. He didn’t get into the technical details (which may be just as well), but the implications are that *the means of production will no longer be the source of power or control*. Huge decentralization – for computing but also for all that goes with it, like large-scale research... like MIT. See the center’s site here: <http://cba.mit.edu/>.
- **Tim Jackson, Prosperity Without Growth** – this is the TED talk I wish I could give. Alas, it’s already been done, and done well. His talk will be up online any day now, and his book is already available: http://www.amazon.com/Prosperity-Without-Growth-Economics-Finite/dp/1844078949/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1280410908&sr=1-1
- **Julian Assange, head of Wikileaks** – this was a very provocative talk (even moreso after this week’s release of the massive Afghan-related leaks on his site). The audience was overwhelmingly supportive – a huge standing ovation - but this seems a bit under-nuanced to me. I am not so naïve as to think a government (or any large entity) is ever entirely transparent with its information, but it is equally naïve to think that there is NO need for secrecy, ever. Basically Assange said he is the one who determines whether received material is published through the site (after ‘stripping the harm’, such as individual names)... this is not meant to argue on Wikileaks in particular; rather it raises the larger question, on issues of public good, who decides? Which public? Which good? Here is the link to his TED talk/interview: http://www.ted.com/talks/julian_assange_why_the_world_needs_wikileaks.html.