



► **TEDsters 2012**
 (FROM LEFT)
 SHERRY TURKLE
 REGGIE WATTS
 BRIAN GREENE
 SCOOTER
 VIJAY KUMAR
 SUSAN CAIN

At the annual big-brain gathering in California, DAVID HOCHMAN freed his mind—and great things followed.

► **THE WONDERS, THE WEIRDNESS, THE MANY LIFE LESSONS OF TED**



- The lights go down.
The applause comes up.
The speaker takes the stage.
- ▶ In that electrifying moment, anything can happen, which is why I'm clutching my red beanbag chair like it's a teleporter to the future.
 - ▶ Already this morning, I've been awestruck by a "space archeologist" who uses

satellite imagery to locate ancient ruins—we're talking entire cities in Egypt—that were previously unknown. A physicist suggested our universe is one mere speck in a yawning sprawl of "multiverses."

A former corporate lawyer spoke with passion about the power of introverts. ("There's zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas," she said softly.) Then there were the bug-like flying robots that zipped through moving hoops and performed the 007 theme on real instruments. Seriously.

It's early-on in the five-day ideas conference known as TED and I'm completely sucked-in, insanely energized, and, let's be honest, probably the biggest dolt in the room. Most people who attend TED don't do one thing well—they do everything well. Ridiculously well. Conference badges have titles like venture capitalist/ornithologist/juggler, and bios are heavy on

Nobel and MacArthur grants. Simply put, TED is a petting zoo for overachievers.

Or a modern curiosity cabinet. TED holds three yearly conferences, with 50 featured speakers at the main event, which, each winter, takes place in Long Beach, California. Two hours due east, in Palm Springs, California, I'm at a concurrent gathering called TEDActive, where we watch the talks live on high-def screens and do all manner of brainstorming-by-the-pool in between. The third gathering, called TEDGlobal, takes place in June in Scotland.

It all started somewhat modestly in 1984, when architect-designer Richard



So Many Bright Bulbs
On opening day at the 2012 TED in Long Beach, curator Chris Anderson played to a packed house of big thinkers.

HOW TO ATTEND A TED

There are several ways to feed your TED habit.

▶ **TED2013** Next year's invite-only Long Beach shindig runs February 27 through March 1. Start calling in your favors now. \$7,500; conferences.ted.com/TED2013/

▶ **TEDActive2013** This Palm Springs event is a simulcast of TED, but you still have to apply. \$2,500; conferences.ted.com/TEDActive2013/

▶ **TEDx** Join local TED junkies at these independently organized events. Free; ted.com/tedx

Saul Wurman summoned 300 fascinating friends and influential colleagues to Monterey, California, to celebrate the growing convergence of technology, entertainment, and design—or TED, as Wurman dubbed it. No big whoop. In that first year, Sony demonstrated the compact disc, Lucasfilm showed off 3-D graphics, and MIT's Nicholas Negroponte spoke for two hours about a strange future of touchscreen kiosks and—*imagine* it—electronic books.

Now talks are limited to 18 minutes—substantial enough for "ideas worth spreading," as the TED tagline goes, but not so long that attendees start dozing off.

Over the decades, thousands of speakers—Jane Goodall, Billy Graham, Bill Clinton, Malcolm Gladwell, Scooter the Muppet—have shared insights on poverty, education, human happiness, global warming, and why we still don't have those jetpacks. Me? I'm just hoping not to sound like a goofball if some CEO/nanotechnologist/ultra-marathoner asks, "So, what'd ya think?" after a talk on quantum mechanics.

TED's breakthrough move was putting the talks online for free in 2006, an experiment in "radical openness," as TED's curator Chris Anderson calls it. He's a British former magazine publisher whose

team bought the once-cloistered franchise from Wurman in 2001. Anderson has since tricked out the brand to include TED Books, a TED Fellows program, an annual TED Prize, a new TED-Ed education initiative for teachers, and independently organized TEDx gatherings in more than 800 cities around the world.

“My hope is that TED is spurring better thinking,” Anderson tells me. “The most thrilling ideas give you a new lens or mind-set—a different way of seeing the world. It’s those that can really spur action.” Not to mention imitators. TED’s success has spawned a wave of talkative copycats: the Aspen Ideas Festival, PopTech, the Clinton Global Initiative, Google’s Solve for X conference, the 99% Conference, Techonomy, and my personal favorite, BIL, an un-TED of sorts, held on overlapping days in Long Beach. Classic BIL talk: How to Crash TED.

Nobody out-TEDs TED, though. TED-Talks have been viewed online more than 700 million times, and without a single Kardashian or Real Housewife in the line-up. As one TEDster put it, “Giving a TEDTalk has become the new Oscar acceptance speech fantasy for smart people.” The 2006 talk by British educator Sir Ken Robinson on how schools actually destroy creativity has logged more than 12 million views. Brain researcher Jill Bolte Taylor’s pulse-quickenning account of her own brain hemorrhage—at 9 million views and counting—is TED’s answer to the action flick. *Eat, Pray, Love* author Elizabeth Gilbert still gets blogger love for her 2009 talk on the origins of creative genius.

Experiencing TED on a laptop is great, but soaking up the atmosphere in person is like tossing around the pigskin with Tom Brady. As he explains how liquid metal batteries can save the world. From the backseat of his low-flying, corn-powered, driverless hover-car. True, it’s almost impossible to get a seat at TED. The conference is still invitation-only, though one can *apply* to be invited by answering daunting questions like, “If a friend were to describe your accomplishments in up to three sentences, what would he or she say?” There is also the

TOP 10 TEDTalks OF ALL TIME

Color-shifting cephalopods, paper laptops, mathematical stunt work. It’s no wonder these TEDTalks have been viewed on the Web more than any others.

1 SIR KEN ROBINSON SAYS SCHOOLS KILL CREATIVITY

VIEWS 13,003,917*
IN A NUTSHELL Today’s kids are taught to be good workers, not creative thinkers.

2 JILL BOLTE TAYLOR’S STROKE OF INSIGHT

VIEWS 9,771,988
IN A NUTSHELL A brain researcher’s firsthand, play-by-play account of her own stroke.

3 PRANAV MISTRY ON THE THRILLING POTENTIAL OF SIXTHSENSE

VIEWS 8,592,722
IN A NUTSHELL Wouldn’t life be grand if a physical gesture produced a digital result? Meet your SixthSense.

4 DAVID GALLO’S UNDERWATER ASTONISHMENTS

VIEWS 7,391,054
IN A NUTSHELL The noted oceanographer introduces his deep sea acquaintances.

5 PATTIE MAES AND PRANAV MISTRY DEMO SIXTHSENSE

VIEWS 7,265,840
IN A NUTSHELL With SixthSense, interact with the physical world as you would an iPhone.

6 TONY ROBBINS ASKS WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

VIEWS 5,903,470
IN A NUTSHELL The self-help pioneer riffs on the “invisible forces” that spur us to action.

7 SIMON SINEK ON HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE ACTION

VIEWS 5,326,190
IN A NUTSHELL The marketing guru draws fascinating parallels between the success of Apple and that of the Wright Brothers, and makes the case for why the ingenious TiVo device is a financial bust and Martin Luther King Jr. inspires forever.

8 HANS ROSLING SHOWS THE BEST STATS YOU’VE EVER SEEN

VIEWS 4,494,897
IN A NUTSHELL Global trends + colorful bubbles and soaring charts—one heck of a convincing argument about the prosperity of developing countries.

9 ARTHUR BENJAMIN DOES MATHMAGIC

VIEWS 4,406,973
IN A NUTSHELL A tuxedo-clad college math professor wows the crowd with his lightning-fast calculations and other seemingly impossible mathematical feats.

10 BRÉNÉ BROWN ON THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY

VIEWS 4,275,478
IN A NUTSHELL This 18 minutes of inspiration about human connection might save you 10 years of therapy.

* Figures as of April 1.

minor issue of ticket price: Being among the 1,350 attendees at the main shebang in Long Beach costs \$7,500.

That makes TEDActive, the simulcast in Palm Springs, look positively cut-rate at \$2,500. Okay, not by a long shot. But to a TED obsessive like myself, it is money well spent—a year’s worth of mind-enriching new ideas crammed into a week in the sun. As the buttoned-up billionaires take their seats at the Long Beach Performing Arts Center (T. Boone Pickens, the Google Guys, and Bill Gates are among the regulars there), the decidedly younger, groovier Palm Springs contingent kicks back on comfy cabana beds, couches, and chic red beanbags to soak it all in. But that’s just the start of it. TEDActive is a burbling wonder engine all its own, with separate in-person talks, interactive art installations, and all manner of nerd-friendly hijinks going late into the desert night (trampoline-jumping circle in honor of Leap Day, anyone?). Think summer camp for the super-duper interesting. In short, TEDActive offers all the

cerebral stimulation without the awkward eye contact with Deepak Chopra in the lunch line.

After three years at TEDActive and a year-round diet of TED videos, it's safe to say that TED has installed a chip in my brain. A new talk uploads every day on TED.com and I'm that guy on Facebook going, "Dudes! Have you SEEN Anthony Atala printing a HUMAN KIDNEY with a 3-D printer?! YOU HAVE TO WATCH THIS VID!!!!"

Sorry. Really, I am. Actually, I'm not. I love TED, and I honestly think the world would be a better place if more people watched the talk where Matt Cutts makes the case for trying something new for 30 days, or young African William Kamkwamba recalls how a scrap-heap windmill he built saved his family from poverty and famine in Malawi. Dudes, you really do have to watch these! In the meantime, allow me to share a few life lessons I've learned at TED.

PUT AWAY YOUR PHONE

First rule of TED: People come before technology. It's not a bad lesson for the rest of us, either. Here we have gathered some of the most plugged-in, switched-on, Internet-happy people on earth (Al Gore is here, for crying out loud) and yet mobile devices are weirdly out of sight all week. During the talks, people actually pay attention. Afterwards, they face each other and have what we used to call conversations. Remember those skills? Listening? Talking? They still count for a lot.

In 1996, Sherry Turkle might have blogged her way through a week at TED—if blogs existed back then. That was the year the MIT professor gave her first rousing TEDTalk about "celebrating our life on the Internet." Her early enthusiasm for living online put her on the cover of *Wired*. This morning, she's on the TED stage to say how worried she is about our connectivity habits. "The

ALMOST TED

Addicted to sharing ideas and getting new ones? Then you might give some thought to checking out one of these TED-like forums. Read on to see which ones spur your interest.

► **PECHA KUCHA** The format of this global, multi-city event is simple: Anyone can present on any topic. The catch? Your presentation can only contain 20 images, and you have but 20 seconds to talk about each one. Ready? Set? Go! pecha-kucha.org

► **POPTECH** In addition to uniting experts from a variety

of fields to share ideas, PopTech, taking place this year in Iceland and Maine, also devotes resources to implementing those ideas. poptech.org

► **THE 99% CONFERENCE** Rather than give you more to ponder, this meeting of the minds in NYC hopes to turn what's in your head into reality. the99percent.com/conference

► **CLINTON GLOBAL INITIATIVE** Based in Manhattan, CGI assembles heads of state, Nobel Prize laureates, CEOs, and the like, each of whom is required to commit to positive change. clintonglobalinitiative.org

► **TECHONOMY** As you might've guessed, this invite-only gathering hones in on the central impact of technology. Its aim? To rally attendants around the idea of tech as an essential tool for addressing many of today's challenges. techonomy.com

► **GOOGLE'S SOLVE FOR X** The equation at this Cali-based confab? A radical solution + breakthrough technologies = answers to insurmountable problems. [wesolveforx.com](http://www.wesolveforx.com)

EMBRACE YOUR INNER NERD

You have to love a conference that puts "Introverts Social" on the schedule. Or where an acceptable conversation opener is, "Where do you stand on the reason versus compassion debate?" Or where the woman getting Angelina Jolie-level attention is a thermodynamics engineer channeling Steve Jobs in her jeans and black turtleneck.

Regina Dugan is the former director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, better known as DARPA and best known as the Pentagon research division that invented stealth technology, GPS, and, that's right, the Internet. Dugan is an intellectual rock star at TED—second only to Bono, who won the Ted Prize in 2005—and her TEDTalk is surprisingly lyrical and inspiring. Imagine a female Tony Robbins with multiple degrees in rocket science.

"Be nice to nerds," she begins. The ones she works with are superheroes, challenging assumptions and pushing the boundaries of what's possible. That sentiment makes sense in her world but it's really helpful in ours, too. As Dugan says, "We all have nerd power, we just forget." We all grow up thinking we are artists, engineers, astronauts, and dreamers, but then give over to

doubt and practicality. In short, we let someone more capable take the lead. "But there is no one else. Just you," she says. "If we're lucky, someone steps in, takes a hand and says, 'Let me help you believe.'"

That might be the most beautiful part of TED, actually, and something to remember as I go about my everyday life, too. Sit through a day or two of talks and you start *believing*. By the end of Dugan's presentation—after hearing about metals light enough to sit atop a dandelion, about a prosthetic arm controlled by human thought, about teams of gamers solving real-world problems like disease and pollution faster than experts can—I feel myself slipping into what I call "TEDmind." Suddenly, everything feels possible.

At dinner that night, someone tells me about the inner-city school he wants to create. "It's going to be completely carbon neutral, with organic gardens everywhere, a world-class science program; and it will be 100 percent micro-funded through crowd-sourcing," he says. I'm right there with him thinking it's definitely going to happen. But that's just one of a hundred new ideas I'm bent on after today. Parking meters will soon signal us when a space is free. Surgery will one day be done remotely. Tourist visits to underwater mountains aren't that far away either.

There's a big nerd inside me, and he's definitely a true believer.

WE CAN BE MORE, WE CAN BE MUCH MORE

Music producer John Boswell is known for his viral web mashups and his latest is a roundup of TEDTalks. Splicing together and auto-tuning quotable moments from the stage and setting it all to a space-age, hip-hop beat, he crystallizes the TED ethos: "Wonder, insight, ideas ... We can change the world if we defy the impossible ... We have the tools. We have the passion ... We can be more. We can be much more ... Let's turn the world inside out."

The song has a hook that sticks in your head all day. We have the tools. We have the passion. Let's turn the world inside out. More than anything, TED is about challenging conventional wisdom. Defying the impossible is its own kind of mash-up—a blend of passion, determination, collaboration, insight, and faith. Each new idea I hear brings me closer to what Chris Anderson says is the point of TED: "Discovering curiosity, the thrill of learning, inspiration, a journey toward a wiser world." My notebook is filling up with people saying, "We can be more. We can be much more."

• Surgeon and *The New Yorker* writer Atul Gawande has developed a checklist for fellow surgeons—a 19-point procedure plan that reminds doctors that even they can't know everything. After it was introduced in eight hospitals, post-surgery complications dropped 35 percent and the death rate by 47 percent. Takeaway: Humility matters.

• In response to the need of a graffiti artist friend with ALS, entrepreneur Mick Ebeling and a team of collaborators used copper wire, cheap sunglasses, and parts from RadioShack and Home Depot to develop the EyeWriter, a low-cost tracking device that allows artists to draw using only their eyes. Takeaway: Choose your friends wisely.

• Poet Billy Collins says great ideas need percolating. "It took a long time to put the wheel and the suitcase together," he says. "Schlepping is an ancient and honorable art." Takeaway: Read more poetry.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING

By week's end, I'm feeling like a bobblehead. My brain is so overloaded with new ideas, new facts, and new inspirations, I can barely stay upright. I'm convinced that our cities can be reinvented for the better, that failure is an essential part of success, that optimism counts, that we're only as good as our boldest experiments,

and that, hey, even Nobel Laureates can mess up a good PowerPoint presentation.

I'm also keenly aware of time. The ticking clock is the quintessential symbol of TED. That red digital clock is on the stage, in the back of the auditorium, and on everyone's mind—and I suspect there's good reason. It's not just that 18 minutes is roughly as long as most people—even Nobel types—can give their undivided attention on a new topic. It's also a reminder: Time moves swiftly. Make the most of it.

The TEDTalks that matter most to me are the ones where there's an element of live life *now*. Look online and you'll see Diana Nyad's TEDTalk about attempting a swim from Cuba to Florida at age 60. ("My goal is to not suffer regrets," she says on her way to a standing O.) In another, Mark Bezos, a volunteer firefighter, cuts to the core of his thinking on doing good for others by saying, "Don't wait until you make your first million to make a difference in somebody's life. If you have something to give, give it now." Time-lapse photographer Louie Schwarzberg urges his audience to appreciate the wonders around us, right here, right now. "When we see ourselves in nature, it's clear we are all connected and one," he says.

Over and over at TED, the same timeless themes emerge—do great things, speak out on injustice, immerse yourself, be vulnerable, be your truest self. And if things aren't going your way, why not fix them? Cognitive researcher Nancy Etcoff ends her persuasive TEDTalk from 2004 on "the surprising science of happiness" with a mash-up quote from poet Rainer Maria Rilke and philosopher Epictetus. It nicely sums up the we-can-be-more mind-set of TED. "If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself. Tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches. First, say to yourself what you would be. Then do

what you have to do.”

My favorite moment this year at TED isn't a line of poetry or even a quote from a TEDTalk but rather an offhanded comment from a 17-year-old. This being TED, we're not talking about just any 17-year-old. At age 10, Taylor Wilson built a bomb out of a pill bottle and some cleaning products. At 11, he got his dad's help to mine for uranium ore in New Mexico. At 14, after being granted access to facilities at the University of Nevada, he became the youngest person ever to build a nuclear fusion reactor. Now a high school senior, he recently earned top honors at Intel's International Science and Engineering Fair.

At the start of Wilson's presentation on the Long Beach stage, someone praises him for taking a glass-half-full approach to life. The kid doesn't miss a beat in explaining how he actually sees the world. "As a scientist," Wilson says, with electricity in his delivery, "my glass is always 100 percent full—with water and air."

IDEAS WORTH LIVING

For me, the true test of TED is what happens after the conference is over. Goodbye gene sequencer/humanitarian/CEO, hello wife, second grader, and taking out the garbage. Integrating the week's 1,001 epiphanies is not easy when there's a crush of unopened emails and a school fundraiser to attend.

The trick is redirecting all that TEDness from the head to the heart. Five days in the desert has opened my eyes not only to head-spinning research and phenomenal people but also to new understandings as a husband, a father, and a human being. The first morning home, my 8-year-old lights up when I say we should bike to school instead of drive. Not exactly Nobel-worthy, but maybe we can shake up our routine for 30 days. My wife is equally tickled when I suggest we pen a family manifesto (everybody has a manifesto at TED) as a reminder to be our best selves.

("People come before technology" is high on the list.) When minor work hassles arise, I remember all the TEDsters working to fight problems far more complex: pollution, oppression, disease. My Friday deadline suddenly feels manageable.

For weeks afterwards—let's face it, for *the year* until I'm back there in my beanbag chair again—TED pushes me to think, reflect, and listen; to attempt new tasks as if I knew I couldn't fail; to embrace that curious nerd inside myself. Regina Dugan is right. "There is no one else. Just you." And while some people choose to see the glass as half empty and others view it as half full, the TEDster in me is siding with the beaming 17-year-old with the nuclear device. Just like him, my glass runneth over.

David Hochman is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.