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A barrage of ideas at TED, from the power of hugs to atheism 2.0 - July 18, 2011 [Bookmark in Connotea](#)

Posted on behalf of Philip Campbell

What did the 900 or so high achievers who paid £5000 to attend last week's [TED Global conference](#) in Edinburgh get for their money?

Any TED conference is, in effect, a living magazine of emotional and intellectual positivity. It hits the attendees with a series of talks full of facts, experiences and opinions, all with the implicit or explicit goal of making the world a better place. No moaning about the world's problems is allowed, only proposed solutions and celebrations of innovation and courage.

The speakers have a high credibility and, knowing their talks may be splashed freely around the world on YouTube, usually give a polished performance. Anyone who knows a TED talk's subject



matter in detail will usually recognise where some assertions are overly generalized or where too much credit may be taken by the speaker, but generally no great damage is done.

The barrage of ideas is relentless - there is no time set aside for public questions. But there is plenty of time for individual networking, so speakers can always be addressed face-to-face. Scientists who attend the annual TED Global meeting (now to be located in Edinburgh) are usually speakers, who get in free - few scientists would pay the sums otherwise required to attend. They tend privately to be a bit bemused by the unbuttoned enthusiasm expressed in applause, whoops and standing ovations, and by such advice as that handed out by one of this year's speakers, neuroeconomist [Paul Zak](#) of Claremont Graduate University, California: "Hugs release [oxytocin](#). Make sure you give eight hugs a day - you'll feel happier." How very different from our own dear conferences and labs.

Attendees this year heard four days of talks about 'the stuff of life', within which there was good science in abundance. One was built on the idea that our brains operate with [Bayesian hypotheses](#). [Daniel Wolpert](#) (right), a neuroscientist at the University of Cambridge, UK, discussed our developing understanding of how the human brain controls movement. Computers can beat humans at chess, but understanding how a human picks up a chess piece is still utterly rudimentary - we simply don't know the algorithm for dexterity. Wolpert's approach is to examine how the brain combines expectations with sensory inputs - Bayesian

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hypothesis testing, in other words - in order to achieve a physical manipulation. Understanding the impact of noise in the system is crucial if such knowledge is to lead to the successful development of prostheses, for example.

Other science included the genetics of human diversity and origins ([Svante Pääbo](#), Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig), the evolutionary history of languages ([Mark Pagel](#), University of Reading, UK), the atlas of gene expression in the human brain ([Allan Jones](#), Allen Institute of Brain Science, Seattle, Washington), genetics of ageing in the nematode worm ([Cynthia Kenyon](#), University of California, San Francisco) and the infectious cancer that is devastating the population of a marsupial mammal known as the Tasmanian Devil ([Elizabeth Murchison](#), University of Cambridge, UK).

Such talks illustrated well how science's insights are penetrating both common and unusual examples of life. They will have inspired many attendees with the sheer intellectual accomplishment on display, as well as some potential applications.

But, however well communicated as a human endeavour, such science leaves little scope for general debate - the topics are too specialized. In contrast, other aspects of life stimulated plenty of discussion.

For example, TED conferences are never short of speakers who inspire by sheer courage and tenacity. Nadia al-Sakkaf, the editor of Yemen's leading English-language newspaper (see this [interview](#) with her on YouTube), and the anti-torture activist Karen Tse, were two remarkable individuals by any standard. So too is Sanjit 'Bunker' Roy, who gave up the privileged life pre-ordained by his upper-class Indian education to work in a village and eventually to found [Barefoot College](#), in which people lacking any formal education or literacy have learned by doing. Most remarkably, he turned a group of grandmothers from Africa and the Himalayan region into (by his account) a world-leading group of solar engineers, bringing electricity and solar-powered cookers to remote villages.

Perhaps the most provocative talk, to this attendee at least, was given by the philosopher [Alain de Botton](#). It was about religion, but addressed constructively at atheists. "Of course there is no God!" said de Botton. "But let's move on - that's only the beginning. We need atheism 2.0, and for that we need to draw from religion."

For the secular-minded or the atheist, he said, the culture engendered by a school and university education utterly lacks key elements of what religion provides believers, regardless of any shared belief in a deity - and these are elements that the rest of us need. Here is a summary of de Botton's argument:

Universities turf you out into the world, as if you need no help. In contrast, all major religions see us humans as only just holding it together. The greatest preacher of all was John Wesley, who emphasised above all, in that spirit, the duty of parenthood. And we need those sermons too - not just lectures full of information, but talks that aim to change our lives. What is more, religions say you need to hear a lesson not once but ten times a day - theirs is a culture of repetition. All religions have calendars in which, for example on a Saints Day, you encounter a particular Good Life or Worthy Thought on an annual basis.

Religions know that we are not just brains, we are also bodies. In the Jewish idea of forgiveness, the orthodox will have a physical immersion in water on the eve of Yom Kippur in order to express their need of forgiveness. And in the modern secular world, people interested in the spirit tend to be isolated, whereas religions provide institutions of spiritual togetherness.

Somehow, said de Botton, those who don't believe in a deity nevertheless need to find ways of incorporating activities that promote spiritual well-being - however we may choose to define 'spiritual' - into the structures of our professional or social lives. The religions, he argued, are the foremost example of institutions fighting for our minds. You may not believe

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in religions, he said, but they're so subtle and clever that they're not fit to be abandoned to the religious alone. They're for all of us.

Photo: James Duncan Davidson / TED

Posted by Mark Peplow on July 18, 2011

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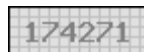
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