

UNCOMMON GROUND
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REDISCOVERING WONDER

It is remarkable what happens when you suspend judgement and disbelief for a while. You rediscover wonder. A little bit of this rediscovery happens every weekend in cinema halls across the country.

But I was very lucky to have my own awakening of wonder at the TED conference in Long Beach, California, early in February. I signed up because Nandan, my husband, was an invited speaker. TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design, and it has become a curious cult in many parts of the connected world. TED is a non-profit foundation run by Chris Anderson, the goal of which is to foster the spread of great ideas. TED was launched by Richard Saul Wurman in 1984, to be “the dinner party he’d always wanted to have”. This year’s TED celebrated 25 years of bringing together the most inventive and talented minds to share their inspiration, their passion and their creativity with a select audience—in this case, about 1,300 delegates from 51 countries.

I must admit I went in there with some cynicism and much conference fatigue. Within the first few hours, though, I newly appreciated a quote attributed to biologist Edward Wilson, which I paraphrase—“Most species are individually stupid but collectively

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smart. Humans are the opposite. They are collectively stupid but individually smart”. As I listened to speaker after speaker strutting his or her brilliance like peacocks in a monsoon shimmy, I was both dazzled and humbled. These were people—scientists, artistes, activists—at the apogee of their exuberance, perhaps also of their hubris, and apparently free from commonplace constraints. Yes, these people were different from most of us, but they also showed us what each one of us, given the right conditions, can be.

There were people doing things that usually occupy the outer reaches of fiction. Like the robotics scientists. Delegates were enabled to engage with

an uncannily familiar bust of Albert Einstein that could reproduce our facial expressions—he smiled back if you did, looked puzzled along with you and could do a fairly ferocious frown, too. We were shown surgical tools that resembled Swiss army knives, which could roam deep inside the body, reducing the need for invasive surgery. We saw the “allosphere”—a digital microscope that can make oxygen literally sing to you. It really was impossible not to romance the technology behind it all.

Yet, the music of the molecules was also interspersed with real music, such as that from *bansuri* (flute) artiste Deepak Ram, and from the group Naturally 7, whose vocal chords effortlessly created the sounds of drums, guitars and violins. “We are capable of doing anything we want to,” declared adventurer Ray Zahab, who, with his grueling runs across the Sahara and the South Pole, should know.

For my *Mint* readers, I must share a particular high. One presenter shared what he thought were the inspirational models for the most watched film ever—*The Wizard of Oz*. His theory is that, among others, Swami Vivekananda was the inspiration for L. Frank Baum’s wizard towards the end of the film. Clearly, the magic of India lives on.

Among the speakers were also those deeply committed to the future of our planet and of all species—including humans—that are living and, too often, dying. There was Margaret Wertheim, whose life mission is to save our coral reefs, and who brings together the work of women, the work of scientists and the work of environmentalists in a beautiful project that models cor-

al reefs and, with it, hyperbolic geometry through the art of crochet. And Nalini Nadkarni, the intrepid trawler of forest canopies, who employs Barbie dolls and incarcerated prisoners in her mission to regenerate and preserve forests.

I could go on, but that would be redundant. The best thing is that you need not believe me at all. You can decide for yourself whether I am exaggerating wildly. Luckily, TED talks are offered free to the world at www.ted.com. Already they have had 100 million views. And there is a plan to put them out in many languages of the world, including Hindi and Tamil, with a framework to allow free translation as well. So you can all go and have your TED moment as I had mine. And I hope you will share your experience with those who might not yet have access to the Internet.

Yet, I must end on a more sombre note, now that I am back at home. We know what people freed up from concerns of survival can do. So it can only strengthen our resolve to make sure every citizen can be freed from worries of food, shelter, livelihoods and more. That is the work before us all.

For nothing is certain, including imminent doom. We still have a chance to create a better future than the one many of us are imagining now. And it will certainly take all of our inventiveness to achieve that.

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