First of all, thank you for your attention. There’s nothing quite like being in a room full of people like this, where all of you are giving your attention to me. It’s a powerful feeling, to get attention. I’m an actor, so I’m a bit of an expert on, well, nothing, really.

(Laughter)

But I do know what it feels like to get attention -- I’ve been lucky in my life to get a lot more than my fair share of attention. And I’m grateful for that, because like I said, it’s a powerful feeling. But there’s another powerful feeling that I’ve also been lucky to experience a lot as an actor. And it’s funny, it’s sort of the opposite feeling, because it doesn’t come from getting attention. It comes from paying attention.

When I’m acting, I get so focused that I only paying attention to one thing. Like when I’m on set and we’re about to shoot and the first AD calls out "Rolling!" And then I hear "speed," "marker," "set," and then the director calls "Action!" I’ve heard that sequence so many times, like, it’s become this Pavlovian magic spell for me. "Rolling," "speed," "marker," "set" and "action." Something happens to me, I can’t even help it. My attention ... narrows. And everything else in the world, anything else that might be bothering me or might grab my attention, it all goes away, and I just ... there. And that feeling, that is what I love, that, to me, is creativity. And that’s the biggest reason I’m so grateful that I get to be an actor.

So, there’s these two powerful feelings. There’s getting attention and paying attention. Of course, in the last decade or so, new technology has allowed more and more people to have this powerful feeling of getting attention. For any kind of creative expression, not just acting. It could be writing or photography or drawing, music -- everything. The channels of distribution have been democratized, and that’s a good thing.

But I do think there’s an unintended consequence for anybody on the planet with an urge to be creative -- myself included, because I’m not immune to this. I think that our creativity is becoming more and more of a means to an end -- and that end is to get attention. And so I feel compelled to speak up because in my experience, the more I go after that powerful feeling of paying attention, the happier I am. But the more I go after the powerful feeling of getting attention, the unhappier I am.
So this is something that goes way back for me. I think the first time I can remember using my acting to get attention, I was eight years old at summer camp. And I'd been going on auditions for about a year by then, and I'd been lucky to get some small parts in TV shows and commercials, and I bragged about it a lot, that summer at camp. And at first, it worked. The other kids gave me a bunch of extra attention, because I had been on "Family Ties." That's a picture of me on "Family Ties."

Then, the tide turned -- I think I took it too far with the bragging. And then, the other kids started to make fun of me. I remember there was this one girl I had a crush on, Rocky. Her name was Rachel, she went by Rocky. And she was beautiful, and she could sing, and I was smitten with her, and I was standing there, bragging. And she turned to me and she called me a show-off. Which I 100 percent deserved. But you know, it still really hurt. And ever since that summer, I've had a certain hesitance to seek attention for my acting.

Sometimes, people would ask me, "Wait a minute, if you don't like the attention, then why are you an actor?" And I'd be like, "Because that's not about what acting's about, man, it's about the art." And they'd be like, "OK, OK, dude."

And then Twitter came out. And I got totally hooked on it, just like everybody else, which made me into a complete hypocrite. Because at that point, I was absolutely using my acting to get attention. I mean, what, did I think I was just getting all these followers because of my brilliant tweets? I actually did think that -- I was like --

"They just like me because they saw me in "Batman," they like what I have to say, I've got a way with words."

And then in no time at all, it started having an impact on my dearly beloved creative process. It still does. I try not to let it. But you know, I'd be sitting there, like, reading a script. And instead of thinking, "How can I personally identify with this character?" Or "How is the audience going to relate to this story?" I'd be like, "What are people going to say about this movie on Twitter?" And "What will I say back that will be good and snarky enough to get a lot of retweets, but not too harsh, because people love to get offended, and I don't want to get canceled?" These are the thoughts that enter my mind when I'm supposed to be reading a script, trying to be an artist.
And I'm not here to tell you that technology is the enemy of creativity. I don't think that. I think tech is just a tool. It has the potential to foster unprecedented human creativity. Like, I even started an online community called HITRECORD, where people all over the world collaborate on all kinds of creative projects, so I don't think that social media or smartphones or any technology is problematic in and of itself. But if we're going to talk about the perils of creativity becoming a means to get attention, then we have to talk about the attention-driven business model of today's big social media companies, right?

(Applause)

This will be familiar territory for some of you, but it's a really relevant question here: How does a social media platform like, for example, Instagram, make money? It's not selling a photo-sharing service -- that part's free. So what is it selling? It's selling attention. It's selling the attention of its users to advertisers. And there's a lot of discussion right now about how much attention we're all giving to things like Instagram, but my question is: How is Instagram getting so much attention?

We get it for them. Anytime somebody posts on Instagram, they get a certain amount of attention from their followers, whether they have a few followers or a few million followers. And the more attention you get, the more attention Instagram is able to sell. So it's in Instagram's interest for you to get as much attention as possible. And so it trains you to want that attention, to crave it, to feel stressed out when you're not getting enough of it. Instagram gets its users addicted to the powerful feeling of getting attention. And I know we all joke, like, "Oh my God, I'm so addicted to my phone," but this is a real addiction. There's a whole science to it. If you're curious, I recommend the work of Jaron Lanier, Tristan Harris, Nir Eyal.

But here's what I can tell you. Being addicted to getting attention is just like being addicted to anything else. It's never enough. You start out and you're thinking, "If only I had 1,000 followers, that would feel amazing." But then you're like, "Well, once I get to 10,000 followers," and, "Once I get to 100 -- Once I get to a million followers, then I'll feel amazing."

So I have 4.2 million followers on Twitter -- it's never made me feel amazing. I'm not going to tell you how many I have on Instagram, because I feel genuine shame about how low the number is, because I joined Instagram after "Batman" came out.

(Laughter)

And I search other actors, and I see that their number is higher than mine, and it makes me feel terrible about myself. Because the follower count makes everybody feel terrible about themselves. That feeling of inadequacy is what drives you to post, so you can get more attention, and then that attention that you get is what these companies sell, that's how they make their money. So there is no amount of attention you can get where you feel like you've arrived, and you're like, "Ah, I'm good now."

And of course, there are a lot of actors who are more famous than I am, have more followers than I do, but I bet you they would tell you the same thing. If your creativity is driven by a desire to get attention, you're never going to be creatively fulfilled.
But I do have some good news. There is this other powerful feeling. Something else you can do with your attention besides letting a giant tech company control it and sell it. This is that feeling I was talking about, why I love acting so much -- it's being able to pay attention to just one thing.

Turns out there's actually some science behind this too. Psychologists and neuroscientists -- they study a phenomenon they call flow, which is this thing that happens in the human brain when someone pays attention to just one thing, like something creative, and manages not to get distracted by anything else. And some say the more regularly you do this, the happier you'll be.

Now I'm not a psychologist or a neuroscientist. But I can tell you, for me, that is very true. It's not always easy, it's hard. To really pay attention like this takes practice, everybody does it their own way. But if you do this thing I can share that I think helps me focus and really pay attention, it's this: I try not to see other creative people as my competitors. I try to find collaborators. Like, if I'm acting in a scene, if I start seeing the other actors as my competitors, and I think, "God, they're going to get more attention than I am, people are going to be talking about their performance more than mine" -- I've lost my focus. And I probably going to suck in that scene.

But when I see the other actors as collaborators, then it becomes almost easy to focus, because I just paying attention to them. And I don't have to think about what I'm doing -- I react to what they're doing, they react to what I'm doing, and we can kind of keep each other in it together. But I want you to think it's only actors on a set that can collaborate in this way. I could be in whatever kind of creative situation. It could be professional, could be just for fun. I could be collaborating with people not even in the same room with. In fact, some of my favorite things I've ever made, I made with people that I never physically met.

And by the way, this, to me, is the beauty of the internet. If we could just stop competing for attention, then the internet becomes a great place to find collaborators. And once I'm collaborating with other people, whether they're on set, or online, wherever, that makes it so much easier for me to find that flow, because we're all just paying attention to the one thing that we're making together. And I felt like part of something larger than myself, and we all sort of shield each other from anything else that might otherwise grab our attention, and we can all just be there.

At least that's what works for me. Sometimes. Sometimes -- it doesn't always work. Sometimes, I still totally get wrapped up in that addictive cycle of wanting to get attention. I mean, like, even right now, can I honestly say there's not some part of me here who's like, "Hey, everybody, look at me, I'm giving a TED Talk!"

(Laughter)

There is -- you know, some part. But I can also honestly say that this whole creative process of writing and giving this talk, it's been a huge opportunity for me to focus and really pay attention to something I care a lot about.

So regardless of how much attention I do or don't get as a result, I'm happy I did it. And grateful to all of you for letting me. So thank you, that's it, you can give your attention to someone else now.
Thanks again.