

David Foster Wallace This Is Water



David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" is a powerful commencement speech that transcends the traditional boundaries of graduation addresses. Delivered at Kenyon College in 2005, this talk has resonated with audiences well beyond its immediate context, offering profound insights into the nature of consciousness, empathy, and the human experience. In this article, we will explore the key themes, the context in which it was delivered, and why Wallace's message remains relevant today.

Context of the Speech

David Foster Wallace, an acclaimed author known for his complex narrative style and deep philosophical insights, delivered "This Is Water" during a time when he was already recognized as a significant voice in contemporary literature. His reputation was cemented by works such as "Infinite Jest," which delved into themes of addiction, entertainment, and the search for meaning in modern life.

The speech was part of the commencement ceremony at Kenyon College, a small liberal arts institution in Ohio. Commencement speeches are often filled with platitudes and conventional wisdom, but Wallace took a different approach. He sought to challenge the graduates to think critically about their lives and the world around them.

The Core Message: Awareness and Choice

At the heart of Wallace's speech is the idea that true freedom and fulfillment come not from external circumstances but from the way we choose to perceive and engage with the world. He argues that the default setting of human consciousness is self-centeredness, where individuals interpret their experiences

through a narrow lens focused on their own needs and desires.

The Default Setting

Wallace describes the "default setting" as an automatic way of thinking that leads individuals to view the world primarily through their own perspectives. This mindset fosters a sense of isolation and frustration, as people become trapped in their own thoughts and concerns. He states:

> "The most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about."

This notion highlights the difficulty in recognizing that everyone around us is also experiencing their own struggles, fears, and hopes. The challenge, according to Wallace, is to break free from this default setting and cultivate a more empathetic and aware approach to life.

Choosing How to Think

Wallace emphasizes that we have the power to choose how we think about our experiences. He encourages the graduates to actively engage with the world and to be conscious of their thoughts and reactions. Instead of allowing their minds to drift into automatic patterns, he urges them to practice awareness:

- Recognize your thoughts: Acknowledge when your mind is wandering into negative or self-centered territories.
- Challenge your perceptions: Question the narratives you create about the world and the people around you.
- Practice empathy: Strive to understand the perspectives of others, recognizing that everyone has their own struggles.

By cultivating this awareness, individuals can find greater meaning in their daily lives and foster deeper connections with others.

The Importance of Education Beyond Academics

In "This Is Water," Wallace argues that the purpose of education extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills. He suggests that the true value of education lies in teaching individuals how to think critically and to be conscious of their choices. This perspective is particularly relevant in a society that often prioritizes metrics of success such as wealth or status.

Real-Life Applications of Education

Wallace illustrates his point by discussing the mundane experiences of adult life—such as driving in traffic, shopping for groceries, or dealing with the frustrations of daily routines. He encourages graduates to recognize these moments as opportunities for conscious decision-making. Instead of becoming irritated or self-absorbed, they can choose to approach these situations with a sense of awareness and compassion.

Some practical applications of this mindset include:

1. **Mindfulness in daily tasks:** Practicing mindfulness during routine activities can transform them into meaningful experiences.
2. **Engaging with others:** Taking the time to listen and connect with people, rather than viewing them as obstacles or inconveniences.
3. **Reflecting on personal values:** Regularly assessing what truly matters in life and aligning actions with those values.

The Role of Compassion and Empathy

Wallace emphasizes the importance of compassion and empathy in overcoming the inherent self-centeredness of human nature. He points out that developing a sense of empathy allows individuals to connect more deeply with others and to see the world from multiple perspectives.

Building Connections

In a world that often promotes individualism and competition, Wallace's call for compassion is a reminder of the interconnectedness of humanity. He encourages graduates to make a conscious effort to:

- **Listen actively:** Pay attention to others without immediately thinking about how their words affect you.
- **Recognize shared experiences:** Understand that everyone faces challenges and hardships, fostering a sense of solidarity.
- **Practice kindness:** Small acts of kindness can have a significant impact on both the giver and the receiver.

By cultivating these habits, individuals can create a more compassionate world and enhance their own sense of fulfillment.

The Relevance of "This Is Water" Today

Since its delivery, "This Is Water" has gained a cult following, with many citing it as a transformative piece of rhetoric. Its themes of awareness, choice, and empathy resonate in today's fast-paced, often disconnected society. The rise of technology and social media has only intensified the challenges of remaining mindful and compassionate.

Lessons for Modern Life

In a contemporary context, Wallace's message serves as a valuable guide for navigating the complexities of modern existence. Some of the lessons that can be drawn include:

- **Mindfulness in a Digital Age:** In a world filled with distractions, practicing mindfulness can help individuals remain present and engaged.
- **Cultivating Empathy Online:** The anonymity of the internet can often lead to dehumanizing interactions. Wallace's emphasis on empathy encourages individuals to remember the humanity of others, even in digital spaces.
- **Redefining Success:** As society continues to grapple with notions of success, Wallace's insistence on awareness and connection encourages a deeper understanding of what it means to lead a fulfilling life.

Conclusion

David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" is more than just a commencement speech; it is a profound exploration of consciousness, choice, and the essence of human connection. Through his insights, Wallace challenges us to reflect on our default settings, to cultivate awareness, and to practice empathy in our daily lives. In a world that often promotes superficial values, his message remains a timely reminder of the importance of genuine engagement with ourselves and others. As we navigate the complexities of modern life, let us carry Wallace's lessons with us, striving to live with intention and compassion—because, indeed, this is water.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main message of David Foster Wallace's 'This is Water'?

The main message of 'This is Water' is the importance of awareness and conscious choice in daily life. Wallace emphasizes that being aware of our surroundings and the default settings of our minds can lead to greater empathy and understanding.

How does Wallace use the concept of 'default setting' in his speech?

Wallace describes the 'default setting' as a mindset where individuals are self-centered and unaware of the experiences of others. He argues that this automatic way of thinking can lead to a lack of compassion and fulfillment, highlighting the need for mindfulness.

What role does compassion play in 'This is Water'?

Compassion is a central theme in 'This is Water.' Wallace encourages listeners to recognize the struggles of others and to choose to respond with empathy instead of judgment, fostering a more connected and meaningful existence.

Why is the metaphor of 'water' significant in Wallace's speech?

The metaphor of 'water' signifies the often overlooked aspects of daily life and the environment we inhabit. It represents the idea that the most obvious realities are often the hardest to see and appreciate, urging individuals to notice and reflect on their existence.

What is the significance of the audience in 'This is Water'?

Wallace directly addresses the audience, primarily college graduates, to emphasize that the struggles of adult life are universal. By speaking to them, he aims to instill a sense of responsibility in choosing how to think and perceive their experiences.

How does 'This is Water' relate to mental health awareness?

'This is Water' relates to mental health awareness by advocating for mindfulness and self-reflection. Wallace's insights encourage individuals to be aware of their thoughts and feelings, which can help combat feelings of isolation and depression.

In what ways can 'This is Water' be applied to everyday life?

'This is Water' can be applied to everyday life by practicing mindfulness, consciously choosing how to respond to situations, and actively seeking to understand others' perspectives. This approach can enhance personal relationships and overall well-being.

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Explore the profound insights of David Foster Wallace's "This is Water." Discover how his reflections
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