

david foster wallace this is water

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water": Navigating the Modern Condition

David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005, later published as "This is Water: Some Thoughts on the Language of Life," remains a touchstone for anyone grappling with the challenges of conscious living in the 21st century. More than just a speech, it's a profound exploration of empathy, awareness, and the relentless effort required to escape the default setting of self-centeredness. Wallace masterfully dissects the mundane realities of adult life, revealing the hidden opportunities for genuine connection and meaningful existence. This article delves deep into the core themes of "This is Water," examining its enduring relevance, unpacking its central arguments, and offering insights into how its wisdom can be applied to our daily lives. We will explore what "This is Water" truly means, the core lessons it imparts, and why David Foster Wallace's message continues to resonate with such powerful clarity decades later.

- Understanding the Core Metaphor: "This is Water"
- The Default Setting: Navigating Everyday Boredom and Frustration
- The Importance of Conscious Choice and Awareness
- Empathy as an Act of Will: Seeing Beyond the Self
- The Language of Life: Cultivating a Meaningful Existence
- Applying "This is Water" in Modern Life
- The Enduring Legacy of David Foster Wallace's Message

The Profound Significance of "This is Water"

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" is not merely a commencement speech; it is a philosophical manifesto for everyday living. Delivered with Wallace's characteristic intellectual rigor and heartfelt sincerity, the address challenges the audience to confront the inherent difficulties of adulthood and the constant battle against our own egocentric perspectives. The phrase "This is Water," as Wallace explains, is a metaphor for the most obvious, most fundamental realities that are often the hardest to see and talk about. These are the invisible, ever-present forces that shape our experience of the world, and understanding them is crucial for a life of purpose and connection. The speech serves as a powerful reminder that true education is not about accumulating knowledge, but about learning to think, to choose what to focus on, and to be present in the moment.

Unpacking the "Water" Metaphor in David Foster Wallace's Speech

The central metaphor of "This is Water" is brilliantly simple yet incredibly profound. Wallace uses the analogy of two young fish swimming together, one asks the other, "How's the water?" The second fish replies, "What the hell is water?" This parable, which Wallace attributes to a Unitarian minister, illustrates the blinding nature of the obvious. Water is so ubiquitous, so fundamental to the fish's existence, that they are utterly unaware of it. Similarly, Wallace argues, the most important realities of our lives – the constant stream of thoughts, the underlying assumptions, the very nature of consciousness – are often the ones we fail to perceive. These are the "waters" within which we swim, and recognizing them is the first step toward conscious living.

This concept of the "water" extends to the mundane realities of daily existence: the frustrations of grocery store lines, the tediousness of commutes, the sheer effort involved in simply being a person in the world. These experiences, though often overlooked or dismissed as trivial, are precisely where the opportunity for growth and meaning lies. By failing to acknowledge the "water," we remain trapped in our automatic, self-centered responses, missing the potential for deeper understanding and connection.

The Default Setting: Escaping the Prison of Self

A cornerstone of David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" is the concept of the "default setting." Wallace explains that without conscious effort, our minds naturally gravitate towards the most convenient, most self-serving interpretations of events. This default setting is characterized by a pervasive sense of entitlement, a belief that our own needs and perspectives are paramount. We see the person cutting us off in traffic not as someone who might be having a terrible day, but as a personal affront to our own carefully curated existence.

This automatic mode of thinking, Wallace argues, is the source of much of our unhappiness and isolation. It creates a mental landscape where we are constantly at odds with the world around us, interpreting every inconvenience as a deliberate act of malice or disregard. The grocery store shopper who takes too long at the checkout becomes an object of intense, internalized rage. The frustrating commute transforms into a personal battle against the universe. This self-imposed narrative of victimhood and grievance is the very "water" we are so often oblivious to, and it prevents us from engaging with life in a more compassionate and aware manner.

The Power of Conscious Choice and Awareness

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" places immense emphasis on the power of conscious choice and active awareness. He posits that the true freedom of adulthood lies not in the absence of constraints, but in the ability to choose how we respond to those constraints. Our "default setting" is not an immutable fate; it is a habit of mind that can be consciously broken through persistent effort and a deliberate cultivation of awareness.

The core of this conscious effort, as described in "This is Water," involves recognizing the automatic judgments and frustrations that arise in our daily lives and actively choosing a different perspective. It's about understanding that the seemingly irritating behaviors of others are often the result of their own internal struggles, not a direct assault on our personal comfort. This realization is not about condoning negative behavior, but about understanding the shared human experience of imperfection and difficulty.

Choosing What to Think: The Battle for Your Attention

Wallace passionately advocates for the idea that we have the power to choose what we think about. In a world saturated with information and stimuli, our attention is a precious and contested commodity. The "default setting" readily directs our attention towards our own grievances and frustrations, reinforcing a cycle of negativity. "This is Water" encourages us to reclaim this attention, to consciously decide what narratives we will allow to shape our understanding of reality.

Consider the seemingly trivial annoyance of a long queue. The default response is to feel impatient, perhaps even angry, focusing on the wasted time and the perceived injustice. Wallace suggests that we can, instead, choose to think about the people around us. We can observe their individual stories, their potential burdens, their shared humanity. This act of deliberate redirection of thought transforms the experience from one of personal suffering into an opportunity for empathy and connection. It's a fundamental exercise in mental discipline, the kind of discipline that truly liberates us from the confines of our own ego.

Cultivating Awareness: Seeing Beyond the Obvious

The ability to see beyond the obvious, to recognize the "water" we are swimming in, is a skill that requires cultivation. "This is Water" stresses that this is not an easy or passive process. It demands vigilance, a constant checking of our own internal narratives. It's about actively seeking to understand the perspectives of others, even when it's uncomfortable or inconvenient.

This cultivation of awareness is what allows us to move from a state of automatic reaction to one of thoughtful response. It's the difference between yelling at a slow cashier and offering a quiet, understanding smile. It's the difference between fuming in traffic and using the time to reflect or simply observe the world passing by. By consciously choosing to be present and aware, we open ourselves up to a richer, more meaningful experience of life, transforming the mundane into the potentially profound.

Empathy as an Act of Will

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" presents empathy not as an innate, effortless feeling, but as a conscious, deliberate choice – an act of will. In a world that often encourages us to retreat into our own subjective experiences, Wallace argues that true empathy requires a strenuous effort to understand and connect with the inner lives of others, even those whose actions we find frustrating or

alienating. This is a radical departure from a passive understanding of empathy; it's about actively choosing to consider the experiences of others.

The core of this argument lies in recognizing that everyone is living their own complex life, filled with their own unique struggles, joys, and anxieties. When we encounter someone who is acting in a way that inconveniences us, our default setting is to interpret their actions through the lens of our own needs and desires. Wallace's message challenges us to actively resist this instinct. It's about recognizing that the person in front of us in the grocery line, who seems oblivious to the urgency of our own shopping list, is also navigating their own set of circumstances, their own internal "water."

The Grocery Store and the Struggle for Compassion

Wallace famously uses the example of the grocery store to illustrate the daily challenges of applying conscious awareness and empathy. The mundane setting of a supermarket becomes a microcosm of the larger human condition. The slow cashier, the person fumbling for change, the parent struggling with a disobedient child – these are all opportunities for our default setting to kick in, to generate irritation and judgment. "This is Water" urges us to recognize these moments not as personal affronts, but as chances to practice our empathy muscles.

Instead of succumbing to the immediate frustration, Wallace suggests we can choose to think: "This person is dealing with something in their life that I know nothing about." This simple mental reframing is a powerful act of will. It requires us to suppress our own immediate emotional response and actively consider an alternative narrative. This is not about excusing bad behavior, but about understanding the shared humanity that binds us all, even in moments of friction. It's about recognizing that our own perceptions are limited and that there is always more to the story.

Empathy as a Daily Practice, Not a Passive Sentiment

The message of "This is Water" is clear: empathy is a practice, not a passive sentiment. It is a muscle that needs to be exercised regularly, particularly in those moments when it feels most difficult. The ease with which we can slip back into self-centered thinking means that cultivating empathy is a constant, ongoing endeavor. It requires vigilance and a commitment to actively choose understanding over judgment.

This commitment means actively challenging our own assumptions and biases. It means being willing to confront the discomfort that arises when we consider perspectives that differ from our own. It's about understanding that the effort involved in seeing the world from another's viewpoint is precisely what makes us more fully human. This is the strenuous but ultimately rewarding work of living a life of conscious awareness, the kind of life that David Foster Wallace so compellingly advocates for in "This is Water."

The Language of Life: Cultivating Meaning and Connection

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" ultimately argues that the quality of our lives is directly tied to the "language of life" we choose to adopt. This language is not just about spoken or written words, but about the internal narratives we construct, the way we frame our experiences, and the fundamental assumptions we hold about ourselves and the world. By consciously choosing a richer, more empathetic language, we can cultivate a life filled with greater meaning, connection, and genuine freedom.

Wallace suggests that the "default setting" of self-absorption, while natural, can lead to a life characterized by superficiality and unfulfilled desires. This is because our internal language, when left unchecked, tends to focus on what we lack, what we are owed, and how the world is failing to meet our expectations. This leads to a constant state of dissatisfaction, a feeling of being perpetually on the outside looking in, unable to truly connect with anything or anyone.

Beyond Consumerism and Instant Gratification

A significant part of the "language of life" that Wallace critiques is the language of consumerism and instant gratification that permeates modern society. In "This is Water," he implicitly points to how advertising and cultural narratives often tell us that true happiness and fulfillment can be found in acquiring possessions, achieving status, or experiencing constant pleasure. This language sets up an unsustainable cycle of desire and disappointment.

The "water" we are often unaware of is the pervasive influence of this consumerist language. It shapes our expectations, our values, and our definition of success. Wallace's speech is a powerful antidote to this, urging us to recognize that true fulfillment comes not from external acquisition, but from internal cultivation. It's about finding meaning in the everyday, in the connections we forge, and in the conscious effort we make to be present and empathetic.

Finding Meaning in the Mundane and the Difficult

The true power of "This is Water" lies in its ability to help us find meaning in the mundane and the difficult. Wallace doesn't offer platitudes or easy answers. Instead, he guides us toward the understanding that the most profound opportunities for growth and connection often arise in precisely those moments that our default setting dismisses as inconvenient or boring. The arduous commute, the frustrating chore, the awkward social interaction – these are the crucibles where we can forge a more meaningful existence.

By consciously choosing to imbue these moments with awareness and empathy, we transform them from sources of irritation into opportunities for profound personal development. We learn to appreciate the complexity of the human experience, both in ourselves and in others. This shift in perspective, this adoption of a more thoughtful and compassionate language, is what allows us to

move beyond the superficial and to live a life that is truly our own, chosen rather than dictated by instinct.

Applying "This is Water" in Modern Life

David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" offers a powerful framework for navigating the complexities and challenges of modern life. The core message – the necessity of conscious awareness and the deliberate choice to transcend our default, self-centered perspectives – is more relevant than ever in an era marked by rapid technological change, constant information overload, and increasing social polarization. Applying the principles of "This is Water" requires a consistent, conscious effort, but the rewards in terms of personal growth and genuine connection are immense.

The practical application of "This is Water" involves actively identifying and challenging our automatic responses to everyday situations. It's about recognizing the mental habits that lead to frustration, judgment, and alienation, and then deliberately choosing alternative ways of thinking and being. This isn't about suppressing our emotions, but about understanding that we have agency in how we interpret and react to our experiences. The insights from "This is Water" provide actionable strategies for cultivating a more fulfilling and engaged existence.

Practical Strategies for Cultivating Awareness

Implementing the wisdom of "This is Water" into our daily lives can be achieved through several practical strategies. One key approach is to practice mindfulness, which is essentially the act of paying attention to the present moment without judgment. This can involve simple exercises like focusing on our breath for a few minutes each day, or consciously engaging all our senses during everyday activities like eating or walking.

Another crucial strategy is to consciously reframe our interpretations of events. When faced with a frustrating situation, such as being stuck in traffic or dealing with a difficult colleague, we can actively ask ourselves: "What else could be true here?" This prompts us to consider alternative perspectives and to avoid jumping to negative conclusions. "This is Water" encourages us to see these moments as opportunities to practice empathy and to understand the shared human condition, rather than as personal attacks.

Overcoming the Siren Call of Distraction

In the digital age, the siren call of distraction is constant. Social media, constant notifications, and an endless stream of information compete for our attention, making the practice of mindful awareness even more challenging. "This is Water" serves as a crucial reminder that these distractions often reinforce our default settings, pulling us further away from genuine connection and deeper understanding.

To counter this, we must make a conscious effort to limit distractions and to create space for

thoughtful reflection. This might involve setting boundaries around technology use, dedicating time for uninterrupted reading or contemplation, or simply choosing to be present in our interactions rather than constantly reaching for our phones. The message of "This is Water" is a call to reclaim our attention and to use it intentionally, directing it towards what truly matters in our lives, rather than being passively swept along by the currents of digital noise.

The Enduring Legacy of David Foster Wallace's Message

The enduring legacy of David Foster Wallace's "This is Water" is a testament to its profound and timeless message about the human condition. Delivered to a graduating class, the speech has resonated far beyond the confines of Kenyon College, becoming a touchstone for individuals seeking to live more consciously, empathetically, and meaningfully. The power of "This is Water" lies in its unflinching honesty about the difficulties of adult life and its unwavering belief in our capacity for growth and transformation.

Wallace's unique blend of intellectual rigor, literary artistry, and raw emotional vulnerability has made his words incredibly impactful. He doesn't offer easy answers; instead, he compels us to confront the often-uncomfortable truths about ourselves and our society. The concepts he explores – the default setting, the importance of conscious choice, the strenuous nature of empathy – are not transient trends but fundamental aspects of human existence. "This is Water" continues to inspire and challenge us, encouraging us to be more present, more compassionate, and more engaged with the world around us.

Why "This is Water" Continues to Resonate

The continued relevance of "This is Water" stems from its direct address of universal human experiences. The struggles with boredom, frustration, and the pervasive sense of self-centeredness are not unique to any particular generation or demographic. In fact, in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, these challenges are arguably amplified. The speech provides a language and a framework for understanding and navigating these difficulties.

Furthermore, Wallace's delivery and writing style are incredibly engaging. He speaks with a rare authenticity, admitting his own struggles and vulnerabilities, which makes his message all the more relatable and powerful. "This is Water" doesn't preach; it invites us into a shared exploration of what it means to be human and how we can choose to live more fully and with greater purpose. The speech's enduring appeal lies in its ability to illuminate the profound possibilities for meaning that exist within the ordinary, everyday moments of our lives.

The Call to Conscious Living

Ultimately, "This is Water" is a profound call to conscious living. David Foster Wallace's words urge us

to awaken from the slumber of unthinking habit and to actively engage with our lives. It is a reminder that true freedom is not the absence of constraints, but the ability to choose our perspective and our responses to the circumstances we face. The speech champions the idea that by embracing awareness, cultivating empathy, and choosing our internal language, we can shape our experiences and live lives of greater depth and connection.

The legacy of "This is Water" is the ongoing invitation to be more present, more thoughtful, and more compassionate. It encourages us to look beyond our immediate desires and to recognize the shared humanity that connects us all. In this way, David Foster Wallace's seminal speech continues to serve as a vital guide for anyone seeking to navigate the modern condition with greater awareness and purpose, reminding us that the most important realities are often the ones we need to be told are there, the "water" within which we swim.

Conclusion: Embracing the "Water" in Our Lives

"This is Water" by David Foster Wallace remains an essential guide for navigating the complexities of modern existence. The speech's powerful metaphor of "water" serves as a profound reminder of the obvious yet often unseen realities that shape our perception and our lives. By understanding our "default setting" of self-centeredness and by consciously choosing to cultivate awareness and empathy, we can break free from limiting perspectives and embrace a more meaningful and connected existence. The enduring legacy of David Foster Wallace's message lies in its compelling call to actively engage with life, to choose what to think, and to find profound significance even in the most mundane of moments. Embracing the "water" is not a passive act, but a continuous, strenuous, and ultimately rewarding journey toward a richer, more purposeful life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core message of David Foster Wallace's 'This Is Water' speech?

The core message of 'This Is Water' is about the conscious choice to pay attention and to think critically about our everyday experiences, particularly the mundane and frustrating ones. Wallace argues that true freedom comes not from getting what we want, but from being aware of our choices and choosing to be empathetic and mindful, even when it's difficult.

Why is the phrase 'This Is Water' used as the title?

The title 'This Is Water' comes from a parable Wallace tells at the beginning of the speech. It highlights how the most obvious, important realities are often the hardest to see and discuss. The fish, surrounded by water, are unaware of it until another fish points it out, mirroring how we often overlook the fundamental aspects of our own existence and the choices we have.

How does 'This Is Water' relate to the concept of 'default setting'?

Wallace uses the 'default setting' to describe our natural, unexamined tendency to see ourselves as the center of the universe. Our default setting is self-centered and often leads to frustration and anger when things don't go our way. The speech encourages us to actively override this default setting and choose a more conscious, empathetic perspective.

What is the significance of the grocery store anecdote in 'This Is Water'?

The grocery store anecdote is a powerful illustration of Wallace's central thesis. He describes the frustration of being stuck in a long checkout line and the choice we have: to succumb to our self-centered anger and see everyone else as an obstacle, or to choose a different perspective and recognize the humanity and potential struggles of the people around us.

What does David Foster Wallace mean by 'worship' in the context of the speech?

Wallace uses 'worship' in a broad sense to refer to what we pay attention to and what we truly value. He suggests that we all worship something, whether it's money, power, pleasure, or a particular ideology. He advocates for choosing to worship compassion, love, and critical thinking, which he believes leads to a more meaningful and less self-destructive life.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water":

1. This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life

This is the seminal work itself, a commencement address that delves into the struggle of everyday awareness. Wallace explores how to choose what to think about and how to approach the mundane with intention. It's a profound invitation to consider the value of empathy and mindfulness in the face of a seemingly self-centered world.

2. Everything Matters: The Radiohead and the Art of Failure

While not directly about Wallace, this book explores the themes of existential questioning and the search for meaning through the lens of art. It grapples with the anxieties of modern life and the desire for something more profound, resonating with Wallace's own explorations of meaning and consciousness. The author examines how creative endeavors can serve as a compass in a bewildering world.

3. The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains

Nicholas Carr's work directly addresses the impact of our increasingly digital environment on our cognitive processes, a concern that subtly underpins Wallace's message. It investigates how the internet may be rewiring our brains for distraction and superficial engagement. The book prompts reflection on how we can maintain depth and focus in an age of constant connectivity.

4. __Meditations__

Marcus Aurelius's classic Stoic philosophy offers timeless wisdom on self-discipline, virtue, and accepting what you cannot control. Wallace was known to be a reader of Stoic texts, and Aurelius's emphasis on inner strength and rational thought provides a philosophical foundation for Wallace's call to conscious living. The text serves as a guide to cultivating inner resilience and a calm mind.

5. __The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment__

Eckhart Tolle's influential book focuses on the importance of present-moment awareness and transcending the ego. This emphasis on living in the "now" aligns directly with Wallace's core message in "This Is Water," which urges readers to be consciously present in their daily lives. Tolle offers practical strategies for overcoming anxieties rooted in past or future.

6. __Man's Search for Meaning__

Viktor Frankl's powerful memoir details his experiences in Nazi concentration camps and his development of logotherapy, a form of psychotherapy centered on finding meaning. His profound insights into resilience and the human spirit's capacity to find purpose even in suffering resonate deeply with Wallace's exploration of choosing one's perspective. The book powerfully illustrates the human drive to discover meaning.

7. __The Gift of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are__

Brené Brown's work on vulnerability, courage, and shame explores the importance of self-acceptance and embracing our imperfections. This resonates with Wallace's call to shed self-absorption and connect with others, suggesting that true freedom comes from accepting ourselves authentically. She encourages readers to live wholehearted lives, free from the pursuit of perfection.

8. __Walden__

Henry David Thoreau's account of his two years living in a cabin by Walden Pond is a foundational text in American literature about simple living, self-reliance, and conscious observation. Thoreau's deliberate retreat from society to examine life's essential truths mirrors Wallace's call for a more intentional and aware existence. The book is a timeless meditation on nature and the examined life.

9. __The Courage to Be Disliked: The New Psychology of Friendship__

Written by Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga, this philosophical dialogue explores Adlerian psychology, focusing on individual freedom, interpersonal relationships, and finding happiness. The book's emphasis on taking responsibility for one's own life and shifting perspective to foster healthier connections aligns with the spirit of Wallace's "This Is Water." It offers a unique framework for understanding and improving our interactions with others.

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