

what is water david foster wallace

what is water david foster wallace is a phrase that references a famous commencement speech delivered by the acclaimed American writer David Foster Wallace. This speech, often referred to simply as "This is Water," explores profound themes of awareness, consciousness, and the everyday challenges of adult life. The speech has become widely celebrated for its insightful perspective on how individuals perceive and engage with the world around them. In this article, the focus will be on unpacking the meaning behind "what is water david foster wallace," examining the context of the speech, its key messages, and its lasting impact on readers and listeners. Additionally, the article will explore why this speech resonates across diverse audiences and how it relates to broader philosophical and psychological ideas. Understanding this speech provides valuable insights into mindfulness, intentionality, and the human experience.

- Background of David Foster Wallace and the Speech
- Core Themes of "This is Water"
- Interpretation of the Water Metaphor
- Philosophical and Psychological Insights
- Impact and Legacy of the Speech

Background of David Foster Wallace and the Speech

David Foster Wallace was a prominent American author known for his complex and thought-provoking writing style. Born in 1962, Wallace gained recognition for his novels, essays, and short stories that often explored the intricacies of modern life and consciousness. "This is Water," delivered as a commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005, is one of his most renowned public talks. The speech was given shortly before his untimely death in 2008, which has further contributed to its enduring significance. The address was initially intended to provide graduating students with guidance on how to live a meaningful and mindful life beyond the academic environment.

The Occasion and Delivery

The speech was delivered during a traditional college commencement ceremony, a moment symbolizing transition and new beginnings. Wallace chose to speak candidly about the mundane realities of adult life, emphasizing the importance of awareness in everyday experiences. Although it was a formal event, the tone of the speech was conversational and approachable, which helped it resonate deeply with audiences both at the time and in subsequent years.

Publication and Popularity

After its delivery, the speech was transcribed and widely circulated, becoming a viral piece on the internet and in literary circles. It has been published in various anthologies and continues to be referenced in discussions about mindfulness, education, and personal growth. The popularity of the speech has made it a seminal work for understanding David Foster Wallace's philosophy and literary legacy.

Core Themes of "This is Water"

The speech "This is Water" centers on several interconnected themes that challenge listeners to reconsider how they perceive the world and their daily routines. At its heart, the address is about conscious choice and the cultivation of empathy and attention in everyday life.

Awareness and Consciousness

Wallace highlights the default settings of the human mind, which tend to focus on oneself and one's immediate needs, often leading to frustration and misinterpretation of others' behavior. He advocates for a conscious decision to step outside this automatic perspective and to recognize the broader context and experiences of others.

The Banality of Adult Life

One of the central points of the speech is the recognition that adult life often involves repetitive, monotonous tasks that can feel draining or meaningless. Wallace suggests that the way individuals choose to interpret and engage with these experiences determines their quality of life. The speech encourages embracing these moments with intention rather than succumbing to mindless irritation.

Freedom Through Choice

Wallace stresses that true freedom lies in the ability to choose what to think about and how to perceive situations. This choice is not always easy but is essential for meaningful existence. The speech frames this freedom as a practical skill that graduates should cultivate as they enter the complexities of the adult world.

Interpretation of the Water Metaphor

The title and central metaphor of the speech revolve around the idea of water as a symbol for the often unnoticed realities of life. The metaphor serves as

a powerful illustration of the theme of awareness.

The Story of the Fish

Wallace opens the speech with a parable about two young fish swimming along who encounter an older fish asking, "How's the water?" The young fish do not understand the question because the water represents the ubiquitous environment they exist in but fail to consciously recognize. This story sets the stage for the speech's exploration of how humans often fail to notice the most fundamental aspects of their existence.

Water as Everyday Reality

Water symbolizes the default, background conditions of life that people take for granted. Just as fish may be unaware of the water they swim in, humans can become oblivious to the constant, underlying circumstances shaping their perceptions and experiences. Recognizing this "water" is a metaphor for achieving mindfulness and deeper understanding.

Implications of the Metaphor

By drawing attention to the water, Wallace encourages a shift in perspective—from automatic and unconscious living to intentional and aware engagement with life. It is a call to notice and appreciate the ordinary moments that are easy to overlook but crucial to human experience.

Philosophical and Psychological Insights

The speech incorporates elements from philosophy and psychology, particularly concerning consciousness, meaning, and human behavior. It reflects existential themes while offering practical advice grounded in cognitive awareness.

Existential Awareness

Wallace's message aligns with existentialist ideas about the individual's responsibility to create meaning in an indifferent world. The speech underscores the importance of personal choice in defining one's reality and the necessity of confronting the default self-centeredness that can lead to unhappiness.

Cognitive Behavioral Perspectives

From a psychological standpoint, the speech echoes concepts related to

cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on recognizing and altering automatic thought patterns. Wallace's emphasis on choosing what to think about parallels therapeutic strategies aimed at improving mental well-being through conscious reframing.

Empathy and Social Connection

Another key insight is the emphasis on empathy—understanding others' perspectives as a means of enriching one's own experience. The speech suggests that mindful awareness fosters compassion, reducing conflict and enhancing social harmony.

Impact and Legacy of the Speech

The enduring impact of "This is Water" is evident in its widespread adoption as a source of inspiration and guidance in various fields, including education, psychology, and self-help. Its legacy continues to influence how people approach daily life challenges and personal growth.

Influence on Educational Settings

Many educational institutions have integrated the speech into their curricula or commencement activities due to its powerful message about adult life and personal responsibility. It serves as a tool for encouraging students to develop critical thinking and emotional intelligence.

Role in Popular Culture and Media

The speech has been referenced in numerous articles, podcasts, and motivational talks, emphasizing its relevance beyond literary circles. It resonates with a broad audience seeking practical wisdom for navigating complexity and stress.

Continued Relevance

Years after its delivery, the speech remains relevant as it addresses universal themes of human consciousness and the struggle for meaning. Its call to mindfulness and intentional living is increasingly pertinent in today's fast-paced and often distracting environment.

- Delivered by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005
- Focuses on themes of awareness, choice, and empathy
- Uses the metaphor of water to illustrate unnoticed realities

- Integrates philosophical and psychological concepts
- Has lasting impact on education and popular culture

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'This is Water' by David Foster Wallace?

'This is Water' is a commencement speech given by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005, focusing on the importance of awareness and choosing how to think in everyday life.

Why is 'This is Water' by David Foster Wallace so popular?

The speech resonates widely because it addresses the challenges of adult life and the value of mindfulness, empathy, and conscious living in a relatable and profound way.

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

The main message is that true freedom involves being aware of our default settings and consciously choosing how to perceive and think about the world around us, especially in mundane or frustrating situations.

Where can I find the full text or video of David Foster Wallace's 'This is Water'?

The full text and video of 'This is Water' are widely available online on various websites, including Kenyon College's official site and YouTube.

How does David Foster Wallace use the metaphor of water in his speech?

The metaphor of water illustrates how the most obvious and important realities are often the hardest to see and talk about, much like fish not noticing the water they swim in every day.

Is 'This is Water' considered a literary work or a speech?

'This is Water' is primarily a commencement speech, but it is also regarded as a significant literary work due to its eloquent language and deep philosophical insights.

How has 'This is Water' influenced popular culture

and self-help literature?

The speech has inspired many in popular culture and self-help circles by emphasizing mindfulness, the importance of perspective, and the conscious choice to live a compassionate and meaningful life.

Additional Resources

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

This is the original commencement speech by David Foster Wallace, where he explores the importance of awareness and empathy in everyday life. It highlights the often overlooked realities of adult life and encourages readers to consciously choose how they think and perceive the world. The essay is celebrated for its profound insight into mindfulness and the human condition.

2. *The Pale King*

An unfinished novel by David Foster Wallace, this book delves into the lives of IRS agents and explores themes of boredom, bureaucracy, and the search for meaning. It reflects Wallace's deep interest in the mundane aspects of life, much like his essay "This Is Water." The novel offers a rich tapestry of characters and philosophical reflections.

3. *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*

This collection of essays showcases Wallace's unique ability to blend humor, intellect, and moral inquiry. The title essay questions the ethics of boiling lobsters alive, while others explore various facets of culture, language, and personal experience. Readers who appreciate "This Is Water" will find his voice and analytical style compelling throughout.

4. *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity*

In this book, Wallace tackles the complex mathematical concept of infinity with clarity and wit. Although a departure from his usual literary style, the book reflects his fascination with deep, abstract ideas. It's an engaging read for those interested in the philosophy of mathematics and the limits of human understanding.

5. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

A collection of short stories that reveal Wallace's sharp insight into human psychology and communication. The stories often feature complex characters grappling with loneliness, desire, and self-awareness. This book complements the themes of perception and consciousness found in "This Is Water."

6. *Infinite Jest*

Wallace's magnum opus, this sprawling novel explores addiction, entertainment, and the search for happiness in modern society. Known for its complexity and depth, it challenges readers to engage with its multifaceted narrative and philosophical questions. Themes of awareness and the struggle to find meaning resonate with those who appreciated "This Is Water."

7. *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*

This collection of interviews provides insight into Wallace's thoughts on writing, life, and the themes he explored in his work. It offers a closer look at his philosophy and creative process, enriching the reader's understanding of essays like "This Is Water." Fans will appreciate hearing Wallace's voice directly through these candid discussions.

8. *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present*

While not about Wallace or his essay, this book by Mark Costello shares a similar analytical spirit in examining cultural phenomena. It explores how music and race intersect in urban settings, offering a thoughtful critique of popular culture. Readers interested in cultural analysis akin to Wallace's style may find this book intriguing.

9. *The Stranger Beside Me*

A true crime classic by Ann Rule, this book is unrelated to Wallace but shares a deep exploration of human nature and perception. It tells the chilling story of a serial killer known personally to the author. Though different in content, it complements themes of awareness and understanding the hidden depths of people.

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