

this is water david foster wallace

This is water, a profound essay and commencement speech delivered by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005, has become a seminal work in contemporary literature and philosophy. In this speech, Wallace tackles the nature of consciousness and the everyday choices that shape our lives. His exploration of the human experience emphasizes the importance of awareness, empathy, and the often overlooked aspects of our daily existence. This article delves into the key themes, ideas, and lasting impact of "This is water," providing a comprehensive understanding of its significance.

Understanding the Core Message

At its core, "This is water" serves as a reminder of the importance of awareness in our daily lives. Wallace emphasizes that the default setting of human consciousness is often self-centered and uninformed. He invites listeners to consider the automatic thoughts and perceptions that dominate their lives, urging them to break free from this default setting.

The Default Setting

1. **Self-Centeredness:** Wallace posits that humans are naturally inclined to view the world through a lens of self-interest. This default setting leads to a narrow perception of reality, where one's own experiences and feelings take precedence over those of others.
2. **Automatic Thinking:** The speech highlights how much of our daily thought processes operate on autopilot. When we encounter mundane situations, such as traffic or long lines, we often react with frustration, seeing these moments as inconveniences rather than opportunities for mindfulness.
3. **The Importance of Choice:** Wallace stresses that while we cannot control our circumstances, we can control how we respond to them. The conscious choice to see beyond ourselves is a critical aspect of leading a meaningful life.

Empathy and Connection

Wallace emphasizes the significance of empathy and the connections we share with others. He argues that recognizing the shared humanity in everyone we encounter can transform our experiences and interactions.

The Human Experience

1. **Shared Struggles:** One of the essential points Wallace makes is that everyone is fighting their own battles. Acknowledging this universal struggle can foster empathy and understanding, allowing us to

be more supportive and compassionate individuals.

2. **Breaking Down Barriers:** By recognizing that others are not just background characters in our lives, we can begin to break down the barriers that separate us. This shift in perspective encourages a more profound connection with others, enriching our own experiences.

3. **Mindfulness in Interaction:** Wallace suggests that being present in our interactions can significantly impact how we relate to others. By choosing to engage with empathy and awareness, we can create a more connected and compassionate world.

The Role of Education

In "This is water," Wallace addresses the role of education in shaping our consciousness and awareness. He argues that true education goes beyond acquiring knowledge; it involves learning how to think critically and empathetically.

Critical Thinking

1. **Questioning Assumptions:** Education should encourage individuals to question their assumptions and beliefs. By challenging the way we think, we can avoid falling into the trap of complacency and ignorance.

2. **Awareness of Perspectives:** Wallace emphasizes the importance of understanding different viewpoints. Education should foster an appreciation for diversity and encourage individuals to consider perspectives outside their own.

3. **Lifelong Learning:** The journey of education does not end with formal schooling. Wallace advocates for a lifelong commitment to learning, urging individuals to remain curious and open-minded throughout their lives.

The Impact of "This is Water" on Popular Culture

Since its delivery, "This is water" has resonated with a broad audience, transcending the context of a commencement speech. Its themes have permeated popular culture, inspiring discussions about mindfulness, empathy, and the human experience.

Widespread Influence

1. **Literary Impact:** Wallace's speech has sparked interest in his literary works, prompting readers to explore his novels, essays, and other writings. His unique style and profound insights continue to captivate audiences.

2. **Mindfulness Movement:** The concepts presented in "This is water" have contributed to the growing

mindfulness movement. Many individuals and organizations have adopted its principles to promote awareness and compassion in daily life.

3. Social Media and Memes: Quotes and excerpts from the speech have been widely shared on social media, often used to inspire and motivate others. The phrase "This is water" has become a cultural shorthand for mindfulness and awareness.

Applying "This is Water" to Daily Life

The principles outlined in "This is water" can be integrated into everyday life, enhancing our experiences and relationships.

Practical Steps for Mindfulness

1. Practice Gratitude: Begin each day by acknowledging the things you are grateful for. This practice shifts focus from negativity to appreciation, fostering a positive mindset.
2. Engage in Active Listening: When conversing with others, practice active listening. Pay attention to their words, emotions, and body language, creating a deeper connection.
3. Mindful Commuting: Instead of succumbing to frustration during your commute, use that time to practice mindfulness. Reflect on your thoughts or engage in deep breathing exercises.
4. Limit Distractions: In a world filled with distractions, prioritize moments of stillness. Set aside time each day to disconnect from technology and engage in self-reflection or meditation.
5. Challenge Your Perspective: When faced with challenges, consciously choose to view situations from different angles. This practice encourages empathy and enhances problem-solving skills.

Conclusion

"This is water," by David Foster Wallace, is more than just a speech; it is a call to consciousness and empathy in an often disconnected world. By urging individuals to break free from their default settings and embrace awareness, Wallace offers a profound perspective on the human experience. His exploration of empathy, critical thinking, and the role of education serves as a guide for navigating life with intention and compassion. As we reflect on the lessons of "This is water," we are reminded that the choice to perceive and engage with the world around us is ultimately ours, and it is this choice that can lead to a more fulfilling and connected existence.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of David Foster Wallace's 'This Is Water' speech?

The main theme of 'This Is Water' is the importance of awareness and mindfulness in everyday life, encouraging individuals to recognize the default settings of their thoughts and choose how they perceive and respond to the world around them.

What does Wallace mean by 'default settings' in his speech?

Wallace refers to 'default settings' as the automatic, often unconscious ways of thinking that people tend to adopt, which can lead to a self-centered and unexamined life unless consciously challenged.

How does Wallace illustrate the concept of awareness in 'This Is Water'?

Wallace illustrates the concept of awareness by describing a typical day in the life of an adult, emphasizing how easy it is to go through life on autopilot, and highlighting the importance of actively choosing how to interpret experiences.

What is the significance of the title 'This Is Water'?

The title 'This Is Water' serves as a metaphor for the often overlooked aspects of our lives, suggesting that the most obvious and important realities are frequently missed due to our habitual thinking.

What role does empathy play in Wallace's message?

Empathy plays a crucial role in Wallace's message as he encourages individuals to recognize the humanity in others, which fosters connection and understanding, rather than viewing them as mere obstacles or inconveniences.

How does Wallace suggest we can achieve a more meaningful life?

Wallace suggests that achieving a more meaningful life involves actively choosing how to think, being aware of our surroundings, and making a conscious effort to empathize with others, rather than succumbing to self-centeredness.

What impact has 'This Is Water' had on popular culture?

'This Is Water' has had a significant impact on popular culture, resonating with audiences for its profound insights into mindfulness and the human experience, often quoted in discussions about mental health and self-awareness.

In what context was 'This Is Water' originally delivered?

'This Is Water' was originally delivered as a commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, where Wallace aimed to inspire graduates to think critically and live consciously after leaving the academic environment.

Why is 'This Is Water' considered relevant today?

'This Is Water' remains relevant today due to its timeless exploration of consciousness and empathy, addressing issues of mental health, social connection, and the challenges of modern life in a fast-paced, often distracted society.

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