SOFTWARE & TECH

This Is Water David Wallace

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Introduction: More Than a Commencement Speech

In 2005, author David Foster Wallace stood before the graduating class at Kenyon College and delivered a speech that would go on to become one of the most widely circulated commencement addresses in modern history. Titled **This Is Water David Wallace** gave a profound meditation on awareness, choice, and the nature of everyday life. Though Wallace tragically passed away in 2008, his words continue to resonate with millions of readers around the world. The speech was later published as a slim book, but its message is anything but small. At its core, **This Is Water David Wallace** challenges us to reconsider how we think about thinking itself, and to choose a more compassionate, conscious way of moving through the world.

What makes this speech so enduring is not that it offers easy answers or feel-good platitudes. Instead, it asks difficult questions about the default settings of our minds and the stories we tell ourselves about our lives. For anyone seeking a deeper understanding of mindfulness, empathy, and the daily struggle to stay awake to the reality of other people, **This Is Water David Wallace** remains an essential touchstone.

The Context Behind This Is Water David Wallace

To fully appreciate **This Is Water David Wallace** it helps to understand the man who delivered it. David Foster Wallace was a novelist, essayist, and short story writer best known for his monumental novel *Infinite Jest*. He was also a thinker deeply preoccupied with the challenges of modern life: loneliness, addiction, entertainment, and the difficulty of authentic connection. When he stood before the Kenyon College graduates, he was not offering them career advice or a list of achievements to chase. He was offering them a way to survive the boredom, frustration, and quiet desperation that often accompany adult life.

The speech takes its title from a simple parable. Two young fish are swimming along when they encounter an older fish. The older fish nods at them and says, Morning, boys. How is the water? The two young fish swim on for a bit, and eventually one of them looks at the other and asks, What the hell is water? This is the central metaphor of **This Is Water David Wallace**. The water is the invisible, all-encompassing reality of our own conditioned thinking. We swim in it every day, but we rarely pause to notice it.

The Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education

Wallace spoke to an audience of liberal arts graduates, and he argued that the true value of a liberal arts education is not in teaching you what to think, but in teaching you *how* to think. By this, he meant learning to have some control over what you pay attention to and how you construct meaning from your experiences. **This Is Water David Wallace** frames this ability as a matter of life and death, because without it, we remain trapped in the prison of our own automatic, self-centered narratives.

He pointed out that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. The water is everywhere, and yet we are blind to it. The speech is an invitation to wake up, to become aware of the water we are swimming in.

The Central Message: Choosing Awareness Over Default

The most famous section of **This Is Water David Wallace** describes the frustration of a typical adult day: stuck in traffic, standing in a long checkout line at the grocery store, exhausted after work, dealing with rude or oblivious people. Wallace's point is that in these moments, our default setting is to believe that the world revolves around us. We feel that everyone else is in our way, that our time is being wasted, that life is unfair.

This automatic, self-centered mode of thinking is what Wallace calls the default setting. It is natural and instinctive, but it also makes us miserable. The alternative, which he proposes in **This Is Water David Wallace**, is to consciously choose a different way of interpreting these situations. Perhaps the man in the SUV who cut you off is rushing to the hospital to see his dying child. Perhaps the woman screaming at her kids in the checkout line hasn't slept in three days. Perhaps the checkout clerk is genuinely bored and miserable and deserves compassion rather than contempt.

The Power of Conscious Interpretation

Wallace is not suggesting that these alternative stories are necessarily true. He is suggesting that we have the power to choose how we interpret reality, and that this choice is the foundation of a meaningful life. **This Is Water David Wallace** makes the case that real freedom comes from the ability to decide what has meaning and what does not. It is the freedom to be well adjusted to a world that is often frustrating and unfair, not by changing the world, but by changing our relationship to it.

This is not a call to passive acceptance. It is a call to active, disciplined awareness. It requires effort, practice, and a willingness to suffer the discomfort of seeing beyond our own immediate desires. As Wallace put it, Learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think.

The Spiritual Dimension of This Is Water David Wallace

Although Wallace was not conventionally religious, **This Is Water David Wallace** has a deeply spiritual quality. It resonates with teachings found in Buddhism, Stoicism, and Christian mysticism, all of which emphasize the importance of waking up from the trance of self-centeredness. The speech can be read as a modern meditation on the ancient idea that our suffering is largely caused by our attachment to our own desires and our resistance to reality as it is.

Wallace uses the word worship to describe what we give our attention and devotion to. He argues that everyone worships something, whether it is money, power, beauty, intelligence, or social status. The only choice we have is what to worship. **This Is Water David Wallace** warns that if we worship money and possessions, we will never feel like we have enough. If we worship our own intellect, we will feel stupid and inadequate. If we worship beauty, we will grow old and bitter. The only truly liberating object of worship, Wallace suggests, is something like compassion, love, or service to others. These are the only things that do not ultimately disappoint.

Attention as a Moral Act

One of the most powerful ideas in **This Is Water David Wallace** is that how we pay attention is a moral act. Every moment of the day, we are choosing what to notice and what to ignore. We can choose to notice our own discomfort and resentment, or we can choose to notice the humanity of the people around us. This choice may seem small, but over a lifetime, it shapes the kind of person we become.

Wallace argues that the most important kind of freedom is not the freedom to do whatever we want, but the freedom to be conscious of our own thoughts and to choose them deliberately. This is not a freedom that is given to us; it is a freedom that must be earned through daily practice. **This Is Water David Wallace** is, in this sense, a manual for the difficult work of becoming a fully awake human being.

Practical Applications of This Is Water David Wallace

While the speech is philosophical, it is also deeply practical. Here are some ways to apply the lessons of **This Is Water David Wallace** to everyday life:

- Practice mindful pauses. In moments of frustration, pause and take a breath. Ask yourself if there is another way to see the situation.
- Notice your default setting. Become aware of the automatic, self-centered thoughts that arise throughout the day. Do not judge them, simply notice them.
- Choose empathy actively. When someone annoys you, try to imagine what might be going on in their life that could explain their behavior.
- Limit worship of shallow things. Reflect on what you are actually devoting your time and energy to. Is it serving your deeper well-being?
- Embrace boredom. In a world of constant entertainment and distraction, Wallace reminds us that learning to tolerate boredom is a form of freedom.

These practices are simple to describe but difficult to sustain. That is why **This Is Water David Wallace** is not a one-time read but a speech that rewards repeated reflection. Each time you return to it, you may find something new that speaks to your current circumstances.

Why This Is Water David Wallace Still Matters Today

Nearly two decades after it was delivered, **This Is Water David Wallace** remains remarkably relevant. We live in an age of unprecedented distraction, polarization, and anxiety. Social media algorithms feed our default setting by showing us content that reinforces our existing beliefs and inflames our sense of grievance. The very structure of modern life makes it harder than ever to step back and notice the water we are swimming in.

Wallace's speech is a corrective to this trend. It calls us to slow down, to question our automatic responses, and to recognize that other people are as real and as complex as we are. In a time when outrage is manufactured and empathy is scarce, **This Is Water David Wallace** offers a path back to genuine connection.

The Role of Suffering and Discomfort

Wallace does not sugarcoat the difficulty of living an aware life. He acknowledges that choosing to be conscious is often uncomfortable. It is easier to retreat into cynicism, distraction, or self-pity. But **This Is Water David Wallace** argues that the discomfort of awareness is preferable to the numbness of the default setting. Suffering is inevitable, but the way we relate to our suffering is a choice. We can suffer without meaning, or we can suffer with love, compassion, and a sense of shared humanity.

This is perhaps the most radical message of the speech. It is not about being happy all the time. It is about being fully alive, even when life is hard. **This Is Water David Wallace** is a call to embrace the difficulty of being human with courage and grace.

Criticisms and Complexity

No discussion of **This Is Water David Wallace** would be complete without acknowledging the complexity of its author. David Foster Wallace struggled with severe depression for much of his life, and he died by suicide in 2008. Some readers find it ironic or even tragic that a man who wrote so eloquently about choosing awareness and compassion could not save himself from his own suffering.

This tension does not invalidate the speech. If anything, it deepens its meaning. **This Is Water David Wallace** was not written as a self-help manual promising happiness. It was written as a testament to the daily struggle of staying conscious in a world that constantly pulls us toward unconsciousness. Wallace knew firsthand how difficult that struggle could be. His own life and death remind us that awareness is not a magic cure, but it is still worth pursuing.

The speech does not offer easy answers. It offers a difficult question: Are you willing to do the work of choosing how you see the world, even when it is hard? That question remains as urgent today as it was in 2005.

Conclusion: The Water Is Still There

This Is Water David Wallace is more than a commencement speech. It is a wake-up call, a meditation, and a challenge. It asks us to look at the invisible realities that shape our lives and to take responsibility for the way we think. It reminds us that the most important things are often the hardest to see, and that the greatest freedom we have is the freedom to choose our own perspective.

In a world that constantly tries to distract us, numb us, and turn us against one another, the message of **This Is Water David Wallace** is more vital than ever. The water is still there. The question is whether we will choose to notice it, and what we will do once we do. For anyone who has ever felt stuck in the default setting of frustration, resentment, or despair, this speech offers a lifeline. It is not a promise that everything will be okay. It is a reminder that we have a choice, and that choice is everything.

The next time you find yourself in traffic, or in a long line, or in any of the thousand small frustrations of daily life, remember the parable of the fish. The water is all around you. You can swim through it unconsciously, or you can wake up and choose to see it. That choice, made again and again, is what makes a life worth living.

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