

David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water"

Commencement address, Kenyon College, 2005

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

If you're worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise old fish explaining what water is to you younger fish, please don't be. I am not the wise old fish. The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about. Stated as an English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude -- but the fact is that, in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have life-or-death importance. Or so I wish to suggest to you...

...A huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too. Here's just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default-setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: There is no experience you have had that you were not at the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of *you*, or behind *you*, to the left or right of *you*, on *your* TV, or *your* monitor, and so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, *real*. Please don't worry that I'm getting ready to preach to you about compassion or other-directedness or the so-called "virtues." This is not a matter of virtue -- it's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default-setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self. People who can adjust their natural default-setting this way are often described as being "well-adjusted," which I suggest to you is not an accidental term.

Given the triumphant academic setting here, an obvious question is how much of this work of adjusting our default-setting involves actual knowledge or intellect. This question gets very tricky. Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education, at least in my own case, is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract arguments inside my head instead of simply paying attention to what's going on right in front of me. Paying attention to what is going on inside me. As I'm sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head. Twenty years after my own graduation, I have come gradually to understand that the liberal-arts cliché about "teaching you how to think" is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: "Learning how to think" really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed. Think of the old cliché about "the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master." This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in the head. They shoot the terrible master. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before

they pull the trigger. And I submit that this is what the real, no-bullshit value of your liberal-arts education is supposed to be about: How to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default-setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out.

That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense. Let's get concrete. The plain fact is that you graduating seniors do not yet have any clue what "day in, day out" really means. There happen to be whole large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine, and petty frustration. The parents and older folks here will know all too well what I'm talking about.

By way of example, let's say it's an average adult day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging white-collar, college-graduate job, and you work hard for eight or ten hours, and at the end of the day you're tired and somewhat stressed, and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for an hour and then hit the sack early because you have to get up the next day and do it all again. But then you remember there's no food at home -- you haven't had time to shop this week, because of your challenging job -- and so now after work you have to get in your car and drive to the supermarket. It's the end of a workday, and the traffic is apt to be very bad, so getting to the store takes way longer than it should, and when you finally get there the supermarket is very crowded, because of course it's the time of day when all the other people with jobs also try to squeeze in some grocery shopping, and the store is hideously, fluorescently lit, and infused with soul-killing Muzak or corporate pop, and it's pretty much the last place you want to be, but you can't just get in and quickly out: You have to wander all over the huge, overlit store's confusing aisles to find the stuff you want, and you have to maneuver your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts, and of course there are also the glacially slow old people and the spacey people and the ADHD kids who all block the aisle and you have to grit your teeth and try to be polite as you ask them to let you by, and eventually, finally, you get all your supper supplies, except now it turns out there aren't enough checkout lanes open even though it's the end-of-the-day-rush, so the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating, but you can't take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register, who is over-worked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college.

You finally get to the checkout line's front, and pay for your food, and get told to "Have a nice day" in a voice that is the absolute voice of death, and then you have to take your creepy, flimsy plastic bags of groceries in your cart with the one crazy wheel that pulls maddeningly to the left, all the way out through the crowded, bumpy, littery parking lot, and try to load the bags in your car in such a way that everything doesn't fall out of the bags and roll around in the trunk on the way home, and then you have to drive all the way home through slow, heavy, SUV-intensive rush-hour traffic, etc., etc.

Everyone here has done this, of course, but it hasn't yet been part of you graduates' actual life routine, day after week after month after year. But it will be, and many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines besides. But that is not the point. The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing comes in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm going to be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop, because my natural default-setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about *me*, about *my* hungriness and *my* fatigue and *my* desire to just get home, and it's going to seem, for all the world, like everybody else is just *in my way*, and who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem in the

checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line, and look at how deeply, personally unfair this is.

Or, of course, if I'm in a more socially conscious form of my default-setting, I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic jam being disgusted at all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV's and Hummers and V-12 pickup trucks burning their wasteful, selfish, forty-gallon tanks of gas, and I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustingly selfish vehicles driven by the ugliest, most inconsiderate and aggressive drivers, who are usually talking on cell phones as they cut people off in order to get just twenty stupid feet ahead in a traffic jam, and I can think about how our children's children will despise us for wasting all the future's fuel and probably screwing up the climate, and how spoiled and stupid and disgusting we all are, and how it all just *sucks*, and so on and so forth...

If I *choose* to think this way, fine, lots of us do -- except that thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't *have* to be a choice. It is my natural default-setting. It's the automatic, unconscious way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities. The thing is that there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stuck and idling in my way: It's not impossible that some of these people in SUV's have been in horrible auto accidents in the past and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive; or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to get this kid to the hospital, and he's in a way bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am -- it is actually *I* who am in *his* way. Or I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do.

Again, please don't think that I'm giving you moral advice, or that I'm saying you're "supposed to" think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it, because it's hard, it takes will and effort, and if you're like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat-out won't want to. But most days, if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line -- maybe she's not usually like this; maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of her husband who's dying of bone cancer, or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the Motor Vehicles Department who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible -- it just depends on what you want to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is and who and what is really important -- if you want to operate on your default-setting -- then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you've really learned *how to think*, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars -- love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things, deep down. Not that that mystical stuff's necessarily true: The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to *decide* how you're going to try to see it. This, I submit, is the freedom of real education, of learning how to be "well-adjusted." You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.

Because here's something else that's weird but true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The

only choice we get is *what* to worship. And a compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship -- be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles -- is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things -- if they are where you tap real meaning in life -- then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already -- it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up-front in daily consciousness. Worship power -- you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart -- you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful; it is that they are *unconscious*. They are default-settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the so-called "real world" will not discourage you from operating on your default-settings, because the so-called "real world" of men and money and power hums merrily along on the fuel of fear and anger and frustration and craving and the worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of wanting and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default-setting, the "rat race" -- the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.

I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational, the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. What it is, as far as I can see, is the capital-T Truth with a whole lot of rhetorical niceties stripped away. You are, of course, free to think of it whatever you wish. But please don't just dismiss it as some finger-wagging Dr. Laura sermon. None of this stuff is really about morality, or religion, or dogma, or big fancy questions of life after death. The capital-T Truth is about life *before* death. It is about the *real* value of a *real* education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge and everything to do with simple *awareness*. Awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water, this is water."

It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world, day in and day out, which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: Your education really is the job of a lifetime, and it commences now. I wish you way more than luck.

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