

david foster wallace this is water 2

David Foster Wallace This Is Water 2: Deeper Reflections on the Famous Commencement Speech

David Foster Wallace This Is Water 2 delves into the enduring power and profound impact of his 2005 Kenyon College commencement address. More than just a speech, "This Is Water" has become a touchstone for understanding the complexities of adult life, the challenges of conscious awareness, and the ongoing struggle against our default settings. This exploration, a conceptual "sequel" to the original address, aims to unpack the nuances of Wallace's message, offering fresh perspectives on how to truly choose what to think and how to approach the mundane realities of everyday existence with intention and empathy. We will revisit the core tenets of his philosophy, examining its relevance in today's hyper-connected yet often isolating world, and consider practical applications for cultivating a more meaningful and aware life.

- Understanding the Core Message of "This Is Water"
- The Default Setting: Our Innate Self-Centeredness
- The Power of Conscious Choice: Choosing What to Think
- Navigating the Mundane: Finding Meaning in the Ordinary
- Empathy as the Antidote to Self-Absorption
- Applying "This Is Water" in the 21st Century
- The Continued Relevance of David Foster Wallace's Wisdom

The Enduring Significance of David Foster Wallace This Is Water 2: A Deeper Dive

David Foster Wallace's commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, often simply referred to as "This Is Water," remains a powerful and surprisingly relevant artifact for anyone navigating the transition into adulthood and beyond. While the initial impact of the speech lies in its raw honesty about the often-unseen struggles of daily life, a closer examination, or what we can conceptualize as a "David Foster Wallace This Is Water 2" perspective, reveals even deeper layers of meaning. This exploration isn't about finding new words from Wallace, but rather about re-interpreting and applying the profound insights he so brilliantly articulated to our contemporary existence. The speech, in essence, is a guide to cultivating a more conscious and less self-centered way of being, a constant negotiation with our own ingrained habits of thought and perception.

The core of "This Is Water" isn't a set of easy answers, but a profound challenge. It asks us to confront the inherent difficulty of escaping our own perspectives and the automatic judgments we tend to

make about the world and the people in it. The title itself, derived from a brief anecdote about two young fish, serves as a potent metaphor for the invisible realities that surround us, the water that is so ubiquitous it goes unnoticed. Wallace urges us to become aware of this "water," to recognize the systems and assumptions that shape our perceptions, and to actively choose how we respond to the inevitable frustrations and banalities of adult life. This second look, this "This Is Water 2" approach, seeks to understand how these concepts translate into actionable strategies for living a more intentional and empathetic existence.

Deconstructing the "Default Setting": The Wallaceian Perspective

At the heart of David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" is the concept of the "default setting." This is the inherent, unexamined tendency of the human mind to perceive itself as the center of the universe, to interpret every situation through the lens of personal comfort, convenience, and perceived slights. It's the automatic assumption that our own particular brand of boredom, our own unique annoyances, are the most significant things happening in any given moment. Wallace argues that this default setting is not malicious in its intent, but it is certainly self-limiting and, if left unchecked, can lead to a life of resentment, isolation, and a profound lack of appreciation for the world around us.

The Ubiquity of the Default Setting in Daily Life

Consider the everyday experience of waiting in line at the grocery store. The default setting immediately kicks in. We scan the room, judging the slowness of the cashier, the apparent inconsiderateness of the person fumbling with their change, the sheer audacity of anyone who might have a cart overflowing with items when we are merely trying to purchase a single carton of milk. Our internal monologue often becomes a litany of complaints, a reinforcement of our own perceived victimhood in this minor inconvenience. This is the "water" Wallace refers to – the invisible current of self-absorption that shapes our immediate reactions. The "This Is Water 2" perspective prompts us to recognize this internal narrative for what it is: a choice, a habit, rather than an inescapable truth.

The Danger of Unexamined Assumptions

Wallace meticulously highlights how these unexamined assumptions, fueled by the default setting, can lead us down paths of perpetual dissatisfaction. If we operate under the assumption that every traffic jam is a personal attack, every slow-moving colleague an intentional obstruction, and every everyday hassle a conspiracy against our well-being, we are essentially choosing to live in a constant state of low-grade antagonism. The "This Is Water 2" understanding emphasizes that these assumptions are not objective realities but rather interpretations that we are free to re-evaluate. The speech is a powerful call to intellectual and emotional rigor, urging us to question our immediate, often negative, interpretations of events.

The Radical Act of Choosing What to Think

Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of David Foster Wallace's message in "This Is Water" is the emphasis on the power of conscious choice, specifically the choice of what to think. Wallace argues that while we cannot always control the external circumstances of our lives, we absolutely can control our internal response to them. This is where the real freedom of adulthood lies – not in the absence of constraints, but in the ability to consciously decide how to frame our experiences and what meaning to ascribe to them. This ability to choose our thoughts is the antithesis of the passive, unexamined default setting.

Reinterpreting the "Water" of Our Experience

The "This Is Water 2" concept encourages us to view the seemingly monotonous or irritating aspects of life as opportunities for deliberate reinterpretation. Instead of seeing the cashier as slow and incompetent, we can choose to see them as another human being, perhaps struggling with their own unseen burdens. Instead of fuming about a traffic jam, we can choose to see it as a chance to listen to a podcast, to reflect, or simply to practice patience. This is not about forced optimism, but about actively selecting the mental frameworks that serve us better and allow for a more compassionate engagement with the world. It's about recognizing that the "water" we're swimming in is largely a construction of our own minds.

The Constant Effort of Conscious Awareness

Wallace is clear that this act of choosing what to think is not a one-time decision but a continuous, often arduous, effort. It requires a constant vigilance against the pull of the default setting. It's the difference between automatically reacting with frustration and consciously pausing to consider alternative perspectives. The "This Is Water 2" reflection emphasizes that this is a skill that needs to be practiced, honed, and consciously applied. It's about developing a mental discipline that allows us to step back from our immediate impulses and make a more considered, more valuable, choice about how we engage with reality.

Finding the Sacred in the Profane: Navigating the Mundane

One of the most poignant aspects of David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" is its direct confrontation with the pervasive ordinariness of adult life. He doesn't shy away from the fact that much of our existence will be filled with mundane tasks, tedious commutes, and everyday annoyances. However, his message is not one of despair but of profound possibility. He suggests that it is precisely within these mundane moments, often overlooked or resented, that the greatest opportunities for conscious living and genuine meaning reside.

The Illusion of Exciting Extremes

Many people enter adulthood with the expectation that life will be a series of exciting events, punctuated by moments of profound personal growth or dramatic revelation. Wallace cautions against this all-or-nothing thinking. He suggests that the real work of living a conscious life happens not in the extraordinary, but in the utterly ordinary. The "This Is Water 2" perspective encourages us to dismantle the illusion that only peak experiences hold value. The quiet moments of routine, the unglamorous tasks, are the very fabric of our lives and, as such, are fertile ground for cultivating awareness.

The Practice of Attention as Devotion

In "This Is Water," Wallace famously states, "The only thing that is supposed to be depressing about the average American adult life is the sheer amount of it." He then offers a profound counterpoint: the choice to be present and attentive to these moments. This is where the concept of "worship," in a secular sense, comes into play. By choosing to pay attention to the mundane with intention, with curiosity, and with a sense of value, we are, in effect, dedicating our attention to something beyond our immediate self. The "This Is Water 2" lens suggests that this deliberate attention transforms the profane into something approaching the sacred. It's about finding the extraordinary within the ordinary through the act of mindful presence.

- Choosing to see the grocery store as a place of human interaction rather than a personal inconvenience.
- Using the commute as an opportunity for learning or quiet reflection instead of stewing in traffic-induced anger.
- Approaching household chores with a sense of presence, recognizing them as acts of self-care or care for others.
- Engaging with colleagues or family members with genuine curiosity rather than assuming their motivations.

Empathy: The Antidote to the Default Setting of Self-Absorption

David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" implicitly and explicitly champions empathy as a crucial tool for navigating the complexities of human interaction and for escaping the confines of our own limited perspectives. The default setting, by its very nature, is self-absorbed. It prioritizes our own needs, our own feelings, and our own narratives above all else. Empathy, on the other hand, involves actively seeking to understand and share the feelings of another, to step outside of our own skins and consider the world from a different vantage point.

The Struggle for Shared Understanding

Wallace acknowledges that developing empathy is not easy. It requires effort, vulnerability, and a willingness to be uncomfortable. The "This Is Water 2" examination highlights that this is particularly true in our current societal climate, where echo chambers and curated online personas can reinforce our existing biases and make genuine connection more challenging. When we encounter someone whose behavior frustrates us, the default setting screams, "They are wrong!" or "They are deliberately trying to annoy me!" Empathy, however, prompts us to ask, "What might they be going through?" or "What is their perspective?"

Cultivating Compassion in Everyday Interactions

The practical application of "This Is Water" involves a conscious effort to cultivate compassion in our daily interactions. This means actively choosing to see the humanity in others, even when their actions are difficult to understand or accept. It involves recognizing that everyone is fighting their own battles, many of which are invisible to us. The "This Is Water 2" approach is about making empathy a practice, a muscle that needs to be flexed regularly. This can manifest in small ways, such as offering a genuine smile to a stranger, listening actively without interruption, or offering support to someone who seems to be struggling. These acts, seemingly minor, contribute to a more connected and understanding world.

Applying "This Is Water" in the 21st Century: Relevance and Practice

In an era defined by constant connectivity, information overload, and increasingly polarized social discourse, the insights offered in David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" are arguably more relevant than ever. The core challenge he presented – to choose what to think, to be aware of our default settings, and to find meaning in the mundane – resonates deeply with the contemporary human experience. The "This Is Water 2" perspective asks how these timeless principles can be practically applied in our hyper-digital, fast-paced world.

Combating Digital Distraction with Deliberate Attention

The proliferation of social media, 24-hour news cycles, and endless streaming content presents a formidable challenge to focused attention. The default setting thrives in this environment, constantly bombarding us with stimuli that cater to our immediate desires for novelty and validation. Applying "This Is Water" in this context means actively curating our digital consumption, setting boundaries, and practicing deliberate attention. It involves choosing to engage with content mindfully, recognizing when we are being passively entertained versus actively seeking knowledge or connection. The "This Is Water 2" approach encourages digital detoxes, mindful social media use, and the prioritization of deep work and focused engagement over constant distraction.

The Importance of Real-World Connection

While digital tools can facilitate connection, they can also foster a sense of superficiality and isolation if not used thoughtfully. The "This Is Water" philosophy underscores the value of genuine, in-person interactions and the cultivation of empathy in these spaces. The "This Is Water 2" interpretation emphasizes the need to actively seek out and nurture these real-world connections, to practice active listening, and to be present in conversations. It's about recognizing that true understanding and connection often require us to be physically present and mentally engaged, extending beyond the curated personas we often present online.

Personal Strategies for Cultivating Awareness

Implementing the lessons of "This Is Water" requires conscious effort and the development of personal strategies. These are not grand gestures, but consistent, small practices that build over time. The "This Is Water 2" framework suggests focusing on:

- Mindfulness exercises and meditation to develop present-moment awareness.
- Journaling to reflect on thoughts, feelings, and reactions to daily events.
- Practicing gratitude for the often-overlooked positive aspects of life.
- Engaging in activities that require focused attention and skill development.
- Consciously seeking out diverse perspectives and challenging one's own assumptions.
- Making deliberate choices about how to spend one's time and energy, prioritizing activities that foster growth and connection.

The Unfinished Project: The Continued Evolution of "This Is Water"

David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" is not a destination but a journey. It's an ongoing process of self-awareness, critical thinking, and intentional living. The conceptual "David Foster Wallace This Is Water 2" is a testament to the enduring power of his words, inviting us to continuously re-examine and re-apply his profound insights to the ever-evolving landscape of our lives. The struggle against our default settings is a lifelong endeavor, and the tools Wallace provided are essential for navigating this complex, often beautiful, and undeniably challenging human experience with greater awareness, empathy, and a deeper appreciation for the "water" that surrounds us.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary message or theme that people are discussing regarding 'This Is Water' in the context of its enduring relevance?

The core discussion revolves around the speech's continued importance in reminding audiences to be mindful of their automatic, self-centered thought patterns and to consciously choose empathy and awareness in their daily lives, especially in a world saturated with distractions and perceived inconveniences.

How has the interpretation or application of 'This Is Water' evolved or changed since its initial delivery, given current societal trends?

While the fundamental message remains, current discussions often link 'This Is Water' to navigating the complexities of social media, political polarization, and the constant influx of information. People are seeking ways to apply Wallace's call to conscious awareness to resist the echo chambers and performative outrage prevalent online.

What are some of the most common misconceptions or oversimplifications of David Foster Wallace's 'This Is Water' that are currently being debated?

A common oversimplification is reducing it to just 'be nice.' The deeper debate centers on the effort and conscious work required to overcome our natural tendencies, and the understanding that empathy is an active, ongoing practice, not a passive state. It's also sometimes misconstrued as advocating for total apathy towards one's own needs.

In what ways are people finding new or surprising applications of the 'This Is Water' philosophy in their personal or professional lives today?

People are increasingly applying the 'This Is Water' ethos to mindfulness practices, seeking to be more present in mundane tasks and interactions. Professionally, it's being used to foster better communication in teams, encourage leadership that prioritizes understanding over quick judgment, and promote ethical decision-making in the face of pressure.

What are the key critiques or counterarguments being raised about the applicability or effectiveness of 'This Is Water' in contemporary society?

Critiques often focus on the perceived difficulty of constantly maintaining such a high level of awareness, especially for individuals facing significant systemic challenges or mental health

struggles. Some argue that Wallace's eloquent prose can feel unattainable or even guilt-inducing for those already overwhelmed, and that the focus on individual consciousness might downplay the need for broader societal change.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the themes explored in David Foster Wallace's "This is Water," presented as requested:

1. *Illuminations of the Ordinary*

This collection delves into the subtle yet profound moments that shape our daily existence. It explores how paying closer attention to mundane experiences can lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world. The essays encourage readers to find wonder and meaning in the seemingly unremarkable, fostering a more conscious and appreciative way of living. It's about recognizing the inherent richness often overlooked in the rush of everyday life.

2. *The Architecture of Attention*

This book investigates the deliberate ways we can cultivate and direct our focus in an age of constant distraction. It examines the mental structures and habits that enable sustained awareness, moving beyond passive consumption. Through practical advice and philosophical inquiry, it guides readers in building a more robust capacity for mindful engagement. The aim is to train the mind to choose what to pay attention to, rather than being dictated by external stimuli.

3. *Invisible Currents of Connection*

This title explores the often-unseen threads that bind individuals and communities together. It examines the subtle social dynamics, shared emotions, and empathetic bridges that form the fabric of human interaction. The book highlights how understanding these invisible forces can lead to greater compassion and a stronger sense of belonging. It's about recognizing the shared humanity that underpins our individual experiences.

4. *The Unspoken Language of Being*

This work delves into the non-verbal and intuitive ways we communicate and understand existence. It explores how our feelings, perceptions, and lived experiences often transcend words. The book encourages readers to tune into these deeper channels of knowing, fostering a more embodied and authentic relationship with reality. It's about the wisdom found in presence and lived experience, beyond intellectual articulation.

5. *Navigating the Cacophony*

This book offers strategies for finding clarity and purpose amidst the overwhelming noise of modern information and societal pressures. It provides tools for discerning valuable signals from background static, enabling a more intentional approach to life. The author suggests ways to filter, process, and make sense of the deluge of stimuli. It's about developing resilience and focus in a world clamoring for attention.

6. *The Compassion Circuitry*

This exploration focuses on the biological and psychological foundations of empathy and kindness. It examines how our capacity for understanding and caring for others can be strengthened and activated. The book presents insights into the neural pathways and social behaviors that facilitate compassionate action. Ultimately, it argues for the intentional cultivation of empathy as a vital human skill.

7. *The Gift of Mundanity*

This collection celebrates the overlooked beauty and significance found in everyday rituals and routines. It challenges the constant pursuit of extraordinary experiences, advocating for the profound fulfillment available in the ordinary. The essays illuminate how embracing the mundane can lead to a richer, more grounded existence. It's about reframing our perception of the common and finding depth within it.

8. *The Unfolding Present Moment*

This book guides readers in developing a more profound awareness of and engagement with the current experience. It offers practices for loosening the grip of past regrets and future anxieties, fostering a sense of presence. The work emphasizes that true living occurs within the ever-shifting now. It's an invitation to inhabit our lives fully, moment by moment.

9. *The Ethics of Everyday Perception*

This title probes the moral dimensions of how we choose to view and interpret the world around us. It argues that our perspectives carry ethical weight, influencing our actions and interactions. The book encourages conscious reflection on the biases and assumptions that shape our outlook. It's about understanding the responsibility that comes with how we frame our reality and perceive others.

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