

# This Is Water PDF

David Foster Wallace

**This Is Water** Some  
Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant  
Occasion, about Living a Compassionate  
Life **David Foster Wallace**

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# About the book

Exploring the Life and Thoughts of David Foster Wallace

Dive into a unique glimpse of David Foster Wallace, the brilliant mind behind a multitude of bestselling novels, and uncover the journey that shaped him into the remarkable individual he became.

A Rare Speech:

In a singular public engagement in 2005 at Kenyon College, Wallace delivered a commencement address that stands as a rare insight into his philosophical views on life. This address is now available in book format as *\*This is Water\**.

Key Themes:

Wallace poignantly questions how one can navigate a comfortable and successful life without falling into a state of unconsciousness. He delves into the importance of shifting our focus away from our own thoughts to cultivate genuine compassion for others.

Legacy of the Address:

After his passing, this speech transcended its original context, becoming a cherished text featured in publications like *\*The Wall Street Journal\** and *\*The London Times\**. It has sparked endless discussions across blogs and continues to be shared among friends via email, solidifying its status as an


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influential piece of writing.

### Writing Style:

Wallace's distinctive voice—a fusion of casual humor, intricate intellect, and pragmatic philosophy—invites readers to reflect on everyday challenges, offering insights that inspire renewal with each encounter.

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# **This Is Water Summary**

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# Who should read this book **This Is Water**

"This Is Water" by David Foster Wallace is essential reading for anyone seeking deeper self-awareness and understanding of the human experience. College students, in particular, will find its insights invaluable as they navigate the complexities of adulthood and societal pressures. However, the book's lessons are universal, making it relevant for anyone feeling trapped in the monotony of daily life or desiring a shift in perspective. It's especially impactful for those interested in mindfulness, philosophy, or the nuances of everyday choices, as it encourages readers to cultivate empathy and awareness in a world that often promotes indifference.

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# Key insights of This Is Water in table format

Theme	Summary
Existential Awareness	Wallace emphasizes the importance of awareness and consciousness in everyday life, urging individuals to recognize the default settings of their minds that often lead to a dull and unexamined existence.
Education and Learning	The talk, originally given as a commencement speech, highlights the value of education not just in terms of academic learning, but in fostering awareness and empathy towards others.
The 'Water' Metaphor	The title refers to the idea that the most obvious realities (water) are often overlooked; we should actively choose how to perceive life and understand the experiences of others.
Choice and Perspective	Wallace argues that we have the freedom to choose how we think about the world and that our perceptions shape our reality, suggesting that we can choose to see positively and consider others' perspectives.
Routine and Mindfulness	He discusses the mundanity of adult life and how routines can become mind-numbing, advocating for mindfulness to bring awareness and meaning to daily experiences.
Compassion and Connection	Wallace stresses the importance of compassion and understanding in human interactions, encouraging readers to recognize the struggles and experiences of those around them.
Individual Experience	He encourages personal reflection and acknowledges that everyone has their own perspective, which plays a crucial role in their experience of life.

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# **This Is Water Summary Chapter List**

1. The Struggles of Adult Consciousness and Perspective
2. Choosing How to Think in Everyday Life
3. The Importance of Empathy and Connection
4. Breaking Through Default Settings and Awareness
5. Living with Intention and Mindfulness in Daily Routines
6. Embracing the Complexity of Existence and Growth

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# 1. The Struggles of Adult Consciousness and Perspective

In 'This Is Water', David Foster Wallace grapples with the challenges inherent in adult consciousness and the often-unexamined perspectives we adopt as adults. One of the critical realizations he presents is that a significant portion of our daily experiences operates on autopilot, where we unconsciously slip into routine patterns of thought and behavior. Adults find themselves caught in a monotonous cycle of self-centered thinking, where mundane frustrations, like traffic or long lines, can dominate feelings and responses. This is compounded by societal norms that encourage a self-referential worldview, one that privileges our own perspective over others, leading to a deep-seated sense of isolation and disconnection.

Wallace insists that this default setting is a common struggle, suggesting that many adults develop a form of existential "default mode" where life's complexities and the richness of human experiences are overshadowed by everyday annoyances and pressures. This automatic way of perceiving the world leads to a narrow-minded approach to life, resulting in a profound lack of awareness that limits emotional depth. The perspective becomes even more troubling when individuals do not recognize their own thoughts and feelings as choices; they assume their perceptions are the only reality.

Within this context, the struggle for awareness becomes a fundamental


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theme in Wallace's talk. He emphasizes that the true challenge lies in learning how to think and choose one's thoughts intentionally, rather than allowing a default mode of consciousness to dictate one's reactions and interactions. This requires a conscious effort to be aware of the thoughts that arise and to question them—allowing individuals the power to reframe their experiences and responses. This conscious engagement with thought fosters a more profound understanding of one's feelings and the feelings of others, ultimately serving to enhance communication and connection in the inherent complexities of adult life.

Wallace's perspectives illuminate that the act of choosing how to think is an intensely personal journey that demands active participation and persistent effort. He urges readers to navigate through the noise of their surroundings while affirmatively engaging with the experience of being alive. By confronting life's inherent difficulties with deliberate thought, individuals can cultivate a deeper sense of awareness, empathy, and appreciation for life and others.

In essence, Wallace draws attention to the necessity of breaking free from the confines of our default settings. Recognizing the struggles faced in adult consciousness is not merely about acknowledging frustration but involves actively choosing to challenge one's perspective. Through this choice, we confront not only our inner struggles but also the external world, fostering

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growth and connection in an often alienating environment. As such, the path toward a more thoughtful existence is not defined by the absence of struggles but by how we choose to perceive and engage with them.

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## 2. Choosing How to Think in Everyday Life

In his commencement speech, David Foster Wallace highlights the vital concept of conscious choice in our thinking patterns, particularly in the context of everyday life. He emphasizes that the default settings of our minds often lead us into mundane, automatic modes of thinking. These default settings strip away the richness of experience and the possibility of seeing the world with fresh eyes. It becomes all too easy to slide into a perspective that is limited by our frustrations, routines, and personal biases.

Wallace poignantly observes that most of our existence is spent in a comfortable and familiar matrix of thoughts, which shapes our perceptions and reactions. For instance, during an exhausting day, we might find ourselves surrounded by the same familiar frustrations—the slow drivers, long lines, and incessant chatter—that can cloud our view and make life feel unbearable. This often leads to a sense of victimhood, where we perceive the world as a collection of annoyances and obstacles.

However, Wallace provides a critical insight: we have the power to change how we think, to step outside our auto-pilot mode, and to choose to see the world differently. He encourages us to develop an awareness of our thoughts, suggesting that this awareness can lead to a more intentional way of living. When we recognize our capacity to choose how to think, we also recognize our inherent freedom to step beyond our self-centered

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perspectives. This shift not only enriches our own lives but opens us up to others as well.

This conscious choice to think differently requires effort and practice, especially when our automatic thoughts challenge our ability to engage positively with the world around us. Instead of viewing life solely through a lens of irritation or self-pity, we can consciously decide to see the humanity in others—recognizing that everyone is fighting their own battles. This is where Wallace underscores the significance of awareness: it allows us to break free from the narrow confines of our own experiences, encouraging compassion and empathy.

Choosing how to think is ultimately about redefining our relationship with daily life. It becomes a practice of stepping back and considering broader perspectives: recognizing the struggles of the cashier who's had a long day, understanding the frustrations of a fellow commuter dealing with personal issues, or realizing that even the most disheartening situations hold complexity and multifaceted truths.

Wallace's message here resonates deeply in contemporary society, where distractions and negative thinking can dominate. By acknowledging our ability to choose our thoughts and perspectives actively, we can influence not only our personal happiness but also our connections with others and the

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quality of our interactions. Making this choice to think differently fosters a more empathetic and engaged existence, suggesting that awareness is a critical tool in navigating the intricate tapestry of human experience.

In essence, Wallace encourages a commitment to vigilance in our thought processes, advocating for a life that embraces consciousness in everyday decisions. By actively choosing how we think, we engage with the world with intention, presence, and a deeper understanding of our shared humanity.

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### 3. The Importance of Empathy and Connection

In "This Is Water", David Foster Wallace emphasizes how pivotal empathy and human connection are to navigating the complexities of daily life. He posits that the default setting of the human mind is often one of self-centeredness, driving individuals to perceive the world predominantly through their own experiences, fears, and frustrations. This self-absorption can lead to a profound disconnection from others, making it easy to overlook the shared struggles that bind humanity.

Wallace illustrates this concept through relatable examples drawn from the mundane routines of adult life. He describes the typical scenario of commuting, where individuals are often engulfed in their own thoughts, complaints, and irritations. The stress of being stuck in traffic or the irritation caused by a fussy child can obscure the emotions and burdens that others carry. Wallace urges readers to recognize that everyone around them is living a life full of challenges, worries, and hopes, just like their own.

Empathy serves as the antidote to this isolation. By understanding that others also grapple with difficulty, suffering, and existential dilemmas, one can foster a deeper connection with those around them. Empathy allows for a more profound understanding of shared human experiences, enabling individuals to break free from their own tunnel vision. It encourages kindness, patience, and compassion, transforming how one interacts with the

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world.

Wallace notes that practicing empathy requires conscious effort and a willingness to break away from one's default mode of thinking. It's about choosing to see beyond oneself and acknowledging the humanity in others, even in the moments of frustration. This shift in perspective can greatly alter one's experience of life, infusing it with richer, more meaningful interactions. When one embraces empathy, they not only enhance their own life but also contribute positively to the lives of others, fostering moments of connection that elevate both sides.

In summary, the importance of empathy and connection in Wallace's philosophy encourages readers to cultivate awareness of the shared human experience. By compassionately engaging with the world and those within it, individuals can create a more compassionate society and a fulfilling life. Such connections lay the groundwork for understanding, which is essential for a more empathetic and cohesive existence.

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## 4. Breaking Through Default Settings and Awareness

In our daily lives, we often operate on autopilot, governed by ingrained patterns of thought and behavior that serve as our default settings. This automatic way of living may provide a sense of comfort and familiarity; however, it frequently leads to an unexamined existence where our perceptions are shaped solely by our immediate experiences. David Foster Wallace emphasizes that breaking through these default settings is crucial for developing a deeper awareness of our surroundings and ourselves.

Wallace argues that our default mode of thinking is particularly evident in mundane routines, such as during our daily commutes or while going through the motions of our jobs. In these moments, we can easily slip into a self-centered perspective that reduces others to mere objects of annoyance or obstacles in our path. By recognizing that everyone around us has their own struggles, insecurities, and desires, we can shift our focus from a self-focused lens to one that embraces the complexity and humanity of others. This shift requires deliberate effort and a conscious choice to perceive the world differently.

The process of breaking free from our default settings involves actively cultivating awareness and mindfulness. Wallace suggests that we must consciously choose how to think—not only about others but also about


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ourselves and our circumstances. This mindfulness allows us to step outside our immediate emotions and reactions, granting us the ability to respond thoughtfully rather than reflexively. It's a reminder that although we cannot control our thoughts and feelings, we do possess the power to determine how we engage with them.

Developing this heightened awareness can significantly alter the way we interact with the world. Instead of viewing our day-to-day experiences merely through the lens of our own discomforts and agendas, we can practice empathy and understanding. By choosing to recognize the struggles faced by others, whether it's the barista who seems overwhelmed or the driver who cuts us off in traffic, we create an opportunity for connection. This awareness not only enriches our interactions but also empowers us to find meaning in the seemingly mundane aspects of life.

Ultimately, Wallace's call to break through our default settings invites us to engage with life intentionally. It is about resisting the passivity that often accompanies adulthood and embracing a fuller understanding of reality, one that acknowledges the complexities of human existence. Through this lens, we transform our perception of life from a series of obstacles and inconveniences to a shared journey filled with depth and significance.

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## 5. Living with Intention and Mindfulness in Daily Routines

In "This Is Water," David Foster Wallace emphasizes the necessity of living with intention and mindfulness in our daily routines. Wallace begins by illustrating how most people operate on autopilot, governed by automatic thoughts and habitual responses. This unconscious mode of existence can often lead to a monotonous life experience, where individuals overlook the richness of the present moment and the choices that lie before them.

For Wallace, living intentionally means recognizing and embracing the power of choice in how we perceive and react to our environment. He points out that the mundane activities of daily life—such as commuting, grocery shopping, or interacting with colleagues—offer rich opportunities for mindfulness and intentional thought. When faced with frustrations encountered in these routines, he argues that instead of succumbing to negativity or irritation, individuals can consciously choose how to view and respond to these situations. This choice involves a deliberate shift in perspective, where one sees the challenges of daily life not merely as inconveniences but as part of a broader human experience shared among all.

Furthermore, Wallace highlights the importance of being present and aware of one's thoughts and feelings. By cultivating mindfulness, individuals begin to recognize their emotional reactions and habitual thought patterns. This

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self-awareness allows them to step back from automatic responses, considering the impact of their attitudes on their overall wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. Mindfulness practices can manifest in simple but profound ways: taking a moment to breathe and refocus, practicing gratitude amidst chaos, or choosing compassion when confronted with frustration.

Living with intention also invites individuals to engage with the world around them more fully. Wallace encourages readers to be curious and appreciative of the details and experiences that often go unnoticed. Recognizing the depth and complexity of everyday experiences fosters a sense of connection to the world and to the people within it. This intentional engagement transforms the routine into something more meaningful, enriching one's perception of life and fostering a more profound sense of fulfillment.

Ultimately, Wallace's message promotes a mindful approach to existence—one that acknowledges the challenges of life while also embracing the potential for growth, empathy, and connection. Through conscious living, individuals can break free from the confines of default settings and learn to navigate their lives with greater intention and awareness, discovering the beauty and complexity that resides within the ordinary.

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## 6. Embracing the Complexity of Existence and Growth

In "This Is Water," David Foster Wallace invites readers to embrace the complexity of existence as a crucial aspect of personal growth and understanding. He emphasizes that life is often filled with confusion and ambiguity, and it's essential to recognize these complexities rather than retreat into a simplistic view of existence.

Wallace argues that our default settings can lead us to see the world in black and white, limiting our experiences and undermining our emotional and intellectual growth. The challenge lies in allowing ourselves to explore the vast shades of gray that life presents. He posits that each individual faces struggles that are often invisible to others, and acknowledging this reality fosters a deeper connection with our fellow human beings. By confronting the intricacies of life, we can cultivate a broader perspective that enhances our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

The growth that Wallace speaks of is anchored in a commitment to awareness and intentionality. This requires a deliberate effort to move beyond well-trodden paths of thought and behavior. Embracing complexity means accepting that discomfort is a part of life; it is through this discomfort that we can learn and expand our horizons. Wallace underscores this notion by illustrating how routine and familiarity can create an illusion of certainty,

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blinding us to the richness and nuance of our daily experiences.

Moreover, the act of embracing complexity is directly tied to the practice of empathy. When we acknowledge the multifaceted nature of existence, we open ourselves up to the stories and struggles of others, fostering deeper human connections. This interconnectedness is vital for both personal and communal growth. By realizing that every person's life is laden with their own set of challenges, we cultivate compassion and understanding, encouraging a more engaged and thoughtful society.

Wallace concludes this exploration by reinforcing the idea that growth is not a linear journey; it is a continuous process filled with ups and downs. Recognizing and embracing the difficulties inherent in existence allows us to evolve. Each experience, whether joyful or painful, adds depth to our understanding and helps us to navigate the world with greater insight and empathy. Thus, engaging with the complexities of life becomes not just a cerebral exercise but a profound pathway to personal and collective growth.

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## 5 Key Quotes of This Is Water

1. The most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.
2. The default setting is the way we perceive the world, and it's crucial to consciously choose how we see things rather than just falling into automatic judgments.
3. Learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think.
4. The most important choice is how we construct meaning from our experiences and how we respond to them.
5. Real freedom is the ability to choose what to think about rather than being driven by default thoughts.

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