

On David Foster Wallace
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David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) was an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist, and university professor. He is best known for his 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*, which Time magazine included in its All-Time 100 Greatest Novels list. He was one of the most innovative and influential writers of his time. He took his own life in September of 2008. His father reported that he had suffered from depression for more than twenty years, and that medication had allowed him to be productive. However, the medication caused severe side effects and he attempted to wean himself from it to disastrous consequences.

In May of 2005, Wallace delivered the commencement address to the graduating class at Kenyon College. The speech was published in 2009 under the title, *This is Water*. With minor editing, this is a portion of what he said on that occasion:

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 mental 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-lady who just screamed at her little child 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 nightmarish 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, then you will not consider possibilities that aren't pointless and annoying. 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, loud,

slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars--compassion, love, the sub-surface unity of all things.

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 winning 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. I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational. Truth is about life before death. It is about simple awareness--awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: "This is water, this is water."