
This Is Water: The Speech Of David Foster Wallace

On September 12th, 2008, David Foster Wallace committed suicide. Before his death, he gave a remarkable speech to the Kenyans graduating class of 2005. It was called "This Is Water" and in it, Wallace informs the graduates about his perspectives on life. Throughout the speech, Wallace presents didactics to the audience in hopes of elaborating his points to them. Although some may view his speech as disheartening and peculiar, Wallace's speech was a journey where he guided the students through his interpretations of life and ultimately what it resembles--a numb, never-ending cycle. Overall, Wallace wants the graduates to comprehend that individuals live their life in numbness and long before they commit suicide, they find that there's life lacks meaning. By using stories that contain valuable lessons, explaining the effect of the default setting, and informing students about the day-to-day routine of American life, Wallace's speech exposes the melancholy life that graduates are about to encounter.

At the beginning of his speech, Wallace tells a short story about two fish who happen to be swimming together and encounter another fish. As the two fish swim past the third, it states, "...morning boys how's the water..." (Wallace). The two fish swim by and eventually one looks at the other and asks, "...what the hell is water..." (Wallace). Through Wallace's story, the takeaway is that people can become numb to life and forget its meaning. Even though they are here physically, they may not be mentally present. For example, in the story, the fish are evidently swimming in the water, but when the other fish confronts the obvious to the other, it becomes confused. Similarly, if an individual hasn't been living a life with fulfillment and joy, they wouldn't be able to define what life is. However, in Wallace's mind, this is the case for many people--including himself-- and it causes immense loneliness. People must learn to change their way of thinking or else it could lead to mental degradation.

As Wallace's speech progresses, he mentions individuals having a default setting and how they have to learn to adjust it in order to avoid living a life of dullness and isolation. To Wallace, the default setting is the self-centeredness that is within every human being. It is how their consciousness perceives the world and it allows them to think their interpretation is accurate. The default setting causes people to hold the belief that they know everything about the situation at hand. However, this leads to the person remaining inside their head and if they don't alter this setting they'll be "...completely...alone day-in and day out..." (Wallace). To change their behavior, one must consciously decide to view scenarios differently. Instead of having themselves at the center, they must place others there and view the situation through their eyes. By doing so, they'll realize that their initial thoughts were incorrect. Although this choice can end the isolation one feels, it can reappear in their day-to-day routine.

As Wallace concludes his speech, he mentions the day-to-day routine of American life which is depressing, gruesome, and obnoxious. To provide an example of this routine, Wallace informs the audience about a typical day for an American and places emphasis on grocery shopping. It is here that he uses strong diction to exaggerate how irritating American life can be. Phrases such as "soul-killing music" cause a moment of connection with the audience because they've all felt this way before. Wallace also claims that the American life "...involves boredom, routine, and petty frustration..." and even though it may be excruciating, Americans "...get up the next day and do it all again..." (Wallace). This harsh reality allows the speaker to let the audience

dwell on this thought and let the gloominess engulf them. Wallace wants the graduates to know that their life doesn't become easier because they have completed their education. In fact, if there were any times that they felt like that, it will all disappear as soon as they walk out the door once the commencement speech is over. Instead of letting them discover this by themselves, Wallace wants to forewarn them and prepare for the toll it will take on their mentality (like it did on his).

In conclusion, Wallace uses a multitude of tactics to inform the graduates that life is sorrowful and full of repetition. Through storytelling and explaining how default settings can lead to isolation, Wallace tries his best to provide advice to ensure that the graduates maintain their sanity. Although it seems that he has nearly lost him, he wishes the best for them because it's going to be a tough ride. So, even though life may seem bright to the recent graduates, Wallace let them know that it's not remotely close to happiness.