

## “This is Water.” | Speech Part 1 | David Foster Wallace | 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?"

This is a standard requirement of US commencement speeches, the deployment of didactic little parable-ish stories. The story ["thing"] turns out to be one of the better, less bullshit conventions of the genre, but if you're worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise, older 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 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 a life or death importance, or so I wish to suggest to you on this dry and lovely morning.

Of course the main requirement of speeches like this is that I'm supposed to talk about your liberal arts education's meaning, to try to explain why the degree you are about to receive has actual human value instead of just a material payoff. So let's talk about the single most pervasive cliché in the commencement speech genre, which is that a liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about quote “teaching you how to think.” If you're like me as a student, you've never liked hearing this, and you tend to feel a bit insulted by the claim that you needed anybody to teach you how to think, since the fact that you even got admitted to a college this good seems like proof that you already know how to think. But I'm going to posit to you that the liberal arts cliché turns out not to be insulting at all, because the really significant education in thinking that we're supposed to get in a place like this isn't really about the capacity to think, but rather about the *choice* of what to think about. If your total freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time discussing, I'd ask you to think about fish and water, and to bracket for just a few minutes your skepticism about the value of the totally obvious.

Here's another didactic little story. There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: "Look, it's not like I don't have actual reasons for not believing in God. It's not like I haven't ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn't see a thing, and it was fifty below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out 'Oh, God, if there is a God, I'm lost in this blizzard, and I'm gonna die if you don't help me.'" And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. "Well then you must believe now," he says, "After all, here you are, alive." The atheist just rolls his eyes. "No, man, all that was was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp."

It's easy to run this story through kind of a standard liberal arts analysis: the exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people's two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience. Because we prize tolerance and diversity of belief, nowhere in our liberal arts analysis do we want to claim that one guy's interpretation is true and the other guy's is false or bad. Which is fine, except we also never end up talking about just where these individual templates and beliefs come from. Meaning, where they come from INSIDE the two guys. As if a person's most basic orientation toward the world, and the meaning of his experience were somehow just hard-wired, like height or shoe-size; or automatically absorbed from the culture, like language. As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice. Plus, there's the whole matter of arrogance. The nonreligious guy is so totally certain in his dismissal of the possibility that the passing Eskimos had anything to do with his prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogant and certain of their own interpretations, too. They're probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists' problem is exactly the same as the story's unbeliever: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up.

The point here is that I think this is one part of what teaching me how to think is really supposed to mean. To be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties. Because 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.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

# Multiple Choice Mondays

## This is Water. | DFW | Constructed Response Part 1

Directions: Using the article above, answer the following questions. Be sure to use textual support to answer each question. Answers that are not written in COMPLETE SENTENCES will be docked.

1. What is the **MAIN** claim is DFW making through this speech?
2. Which example **BEST** supports the central idea that understanding is a matter of interpretation?
3. Which words would be the **BEST** substitute for the word “deluded” in the last paragraph?
4. Which of the following **BEST** describes the narrator’s feelings in regards to U.S. University commencement speeches?
5. What is DFW’s **PURPOSE** in using stories rather than data to convey the message about the importance of a liberal arts education?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

# Multiple Choice Mondays

## This is Water. | DFW | Multiple Response (Part 2)

Directions: Using the article, answer each question to the best of your ability.

1. What is the **MAIN** claim is DFW making through this speech?
  - A. A liberal arts education is not really about the capacity to think, but rather about the *choice* of what to think about.
  - B. A huge percentage of the stuff that people tend to be automatically certain of turns out to be totally wrong and deluded.
  - C. The exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people.
  - D. There are plenty of religious people who seem arrogant and certain of their own interpretations.
2. Which example **BEST** supports the central idea that understanding is a matter of interpretation?
  - A. The analogy between the “wise” old fish and DFW as the narrator.
  - B. The story about the two fish swimming along uncertain of what water really is.
  - C. The didactic story about the two men in a bar discussing the existence of God.
  - D. The anecdote about that one banal platitude.
3. Which of the following words is the **BEST** substitute for the word “deluded” in the last paragraph?
  - A. Deniable
  - B. Inconceivable
  - C. False
  - D. Veracious
4. Which of the following **BEST** describes the narrator’s feelings in regards to U.S. University commencement speeches?
  - A. The employment of stories is one of “the less bullshit conventions of the genre.”
  - B. Banal platitudes within commencement speeches are “the most obvious” and least worthy.
  - C. Most commencement speeches bracket “the value of the totally obvious.”
  - D. The single most pervasive cliché in the commencement speech genre is “teaching you how to think.”
5. What is DFW’s **PURPOSE** in using stories rather than data to convey the message about the importance of a liberal arts education?
  - A. Anecdotes and short parables enable the audience to higher standards of literary expression.
  - B. Anecdotes and short parables are easier for right-hemisphere dominant personalities.
  - C. Anecdotes and short parables are easier to integrate in comparison to research and statistics.
  - D. Anecdotes and short parables enable the audience to make personal connections with the message.