

**Water Communion:
“This Is Water”**

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The Spoken Meditation

David Foster Wallace (1962 - 2008) is perhaps best known for his 1996 postmodern novel *Infinite Jest*, which is famous for its length (weighing in at more than 1,000 pages) and complexity (its footnotes have footnotes). I will confess to having started reading it once a few years ago, and then never finding the time to finish. I hope to return to it someday.

Wallace tragically committed suicide in 2008 at age 46 after a decades-long struggle with depression. He was beloved by many of the most important writers of our day, and his friend the novelist Jonathan Franzen [described](#) him as “a huge talent, our strongest rhetorical writer.... He was also as sweet a person as I’ve ever known and as tormented a person as I’ve ever known.”

In 2005, three years before his death, Wallace delivered the commencement address at Kenyon College titled, “[This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life](#),” which has been published as its own book.¹ On this Water Communion Sunday, I invite you to hear an excerpt of that speech. I’m only going to share about 20% of the speech with you this morning, but if you find Wallace’s words meaningful, I encourage you to read the full transcript as well as watch a brilliant short film that visualizes part of the speech. For now, here are some of Wallace’s words from 8 years ago:

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?”

The immediate point of the fish story is that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.....

¹ A **transcript** of Wallace’s speech is available at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>. A 10-minute **short film** based on his speech is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z5TIFr5XMo>.

The really significant education...isn't really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about....

Here's one example of the utter wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness.... There is no experience you've had that you were not at the absolute center of.... People who can adjust their natural default-setting...are often described as being "well adjusted," which I suggest to you is not an accidental term.

[Wallace goes on to eloquently detail examples of the "boredom, routine, and petty frustration" that characterize many parts of adult life such as waiting in a grocery store line at the end of an already too long work day. He says:]

my natural default-setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me, about my hungriness and my fatigue and my desire to just get home, and it's going to seem, for all the world, like everybody else is just in my way, and who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem here in the checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line, and look at how deeply unfair this is: I've worked really hard all day and I'm starved and tired and I can't even get home to eat and unwind because of all these stupid...people.... It's the automatic, unconscious way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities. The thing is that there are obviously different ways to think about these kinds of situations.

In this traffic, with all these vehicles stuck and idling in my way: It's not impossible that some of these people in SUV's have been in horrible auto accidents in the past and now find driving so traumatic that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive; or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to rush to the hospital, and he's in a way bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am — it is actually I who am in his way. Or I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that **some of these people probably have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do, overall....**

if you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options.... The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't....

The capital-T 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.”

It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out. Which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education really is the job of a lifetime.... I wish you way more than luck.

I invite you to consider that when Wallace says, “This is water,” he is referring to what we Unitarian Universalists call our Seventh Principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” As you’ve heard me say before, it has been suggested that we UUs would be well-advised to switch our Seventh Principle with our First Principle (“The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”) For UUs, individual freedom tends to be what Wallace calls “our default setting.” But Wallace reminds us that the most radical implications of that individual freedom is the ability to choose to perceive our interdependence with one another, with the ecosystem of this Earth, and even with this cosmos we call the *universe*.

Regarding the opening fish story, Wallace said that, “the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about,” and I invite you to consider that Wallace’s insight about “This is water” also points us toward one of the deepest meanings of the Unitarian Universalist ritual known as Water Communion. During the Silent Meditation and Musical Meditation, I invite you to reflect on the places that have shaped you most during the past year since we gathered last September to practice Water Communion. If you had to select just one place that has shaped you in this past year from which to draw water and wisdom, where would your water come from? And what do you bring to this religious community from being shaped by the source of this water? And as you reflect on the places that have shaped you, remember that we are the fish in Wallace’s parable. And when we are stressed, anxious, and under pressure, we sometimes feel like we are all alone in the vast ocean of this world. But really we are always already swimming in a connected sea of interdependence that we often fail to perceive. “This is water, this is water.”

The Sermon

Just as we might draw up water from a well for sustenance, the places of our lives shape us and become part of us. And after this sermon there will be an opportunity for individuals to come forward and pour water from those places (or symbolically from the provided pitcher of water) into the one large bowl. This ritual represents the ways this Unitarian Universalist community draws truth from many different sources.

And to continue to reflect on the ways that these diverse sources of water and wisdom are all related and interdependent, I invite us to consider this truth from three angles: scientific, Buddhist, and Christian.

From a scientific perspective, Mark Nepo has written, “Water reflects everything it encounters. This is so commonplace that **we think water is blue, when in fact it has no color.**”² That noticing resonates with David Foster Wallace’s fish story that, “the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.” And for Nepo, the wisdom underneath his noticing about water’s lack of color is the opportunity, **like water, “to embrace everything clearly without imposing who we are and without losing who we are.”** While reflecting the true blue of the sky, water still retains its essence. So, whenever Nepo sees water, he experiences a reminder to practice a healthy compassion: “to embrace everything clearly without imposing who we are and without losing who we are.”

Next, from a Buddhist perspective, I invite you to recall what it felt like this morning to sing our opening song, which invited each of us to move through three stages of awareness. From the *first-person singular* (“May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well, peaceful and at ease, and whole”), to the *second-person* (“May *you* be filled with loving kindness. May *you* be well, peaceful and at ease, and whole”), and finally to the *first-person plural* (“May *we* be filled with loving kindness. May *we* be well, peaceful and at ease, and whole”). In the Buddhist tradition, this chant is known as a *metta* meditation, from the Pali word for “loving-kindness” or “friendliness.”

² Mark Nepo, [*The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the life You Have*](#), 150.

Each stage of this meditation is vital. When we find ourselves feeling burned-out, over-scheduled, and doing so much for others that we neglect self-care we need to return to that first-person singular focus on loving kindness toward ourselves (“May *I* be well, peaceful and at ease, and whole.”) At the same time, the meditation builds in ever-expanding concentric circles to the first-person *plural* that includes loving kindness *both* for ourselves *and* all beings (“May *we* be well, peaceful and at ease, and whole.”) The move here is from focusing on a healthy independence to a more mature and healthy interdependence, which includes a healthy self.

And the reason this *metta* (“loving-kindness”) chant was written is that, in David Foster Wallace’s term, our “default setting” is neither for ourselves to be peaceful and at ease, nor for us feeling in solidarity with all existence. Our default setting is narcissism, and we need practices like loving-kindness meditations to help inculcate a different, healthier, more expansive way of being in the world.

And returning to David Foster Wallace’s grocery store scenario, he gives us another example of what he means:

most days, if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this...dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, 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 what you want to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

To echo this sentiment from a Christian perspective, most people misunderstand the deep meaning underneath what Jesus called the Second Greatest Commandment, which is “to love your neighbor as yourself.” Most people fail in their attempts to “love your neighbor as yourself” because they are operating from a first-person *singular* or second-person *singular* perspective.

They are operating from their default perspective in which your neighbor and yourself are two separate, *independent* individuals. The challenge is to shift your way of perceiving the world from first- or second-person singular to *first-person plural*, from independence to *interdependence* — to experience that at the deepest level your neighbor *is* yourself.³ And only from that place of existentially experiencing the interdependent web of all existence will you be able to authentically say and live the words of that third verse: “May *we* be filled with loving kindness. May *we* be well. May *we* be peaceful and at ease. May *we* be whole.” On that deepest level of realized interdependence, you will know for yourself “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.””

Water Communion

In a few moment, if you feel led to do so, you will be invite to come forward, say your name — and then to allow as many people as want time to participate — share **one or two short sentences about (1) where your water comes from and (2) what you are bringing to this congregation as a result of being shaped by the place from which that water comes: a new perspective, an important learning, an inward journey, etc.** After sharing, you are invited to pour a small amount of the water into this one large bowl.

Water may come from travels or from your tap at home. In case you forget water or do not have access at this time to the specific water that has been most meaningful to you from the past year, we will also have a pitcher of extra water that can symbolically represent water from whatever place is meaningful to you.

The water that I bring this morning I received on behalf of this congregation from the Unitarian Universalist Association at the annual UUA General Assembly, which was in Louisville, Kentucky this past year. On Thursday, June 20, 2013, two thousand Unitarian Universalists went down to the river to pray. But their prayer was like that of Rabbi Abraham

³ at the deepest level your neighbor *is* yourself — see Beatrice Bruteau, [*The Holy Thursday Revolution*](#), 6.

Joshua Heschel, who said, reflecting on his experience with Dr. King in Civil Rights Movement, “When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying.”

That night in June, myself, my wife Magin, and two other members of this congregation — Carl Kruhm and Mary Bowman Kruhm — joined two thousand other UUs on the banks of the Ohio River at a rally to raise awareness about the need for clean power as an alternative to the environmental injustices caused by coal mining, fracking, and mountaintop removal. A common theme of the many speakers was that, “We are connected. We are one.” And how we treat one another and this one planet matters.⁴

Wendell Berry, the author, activist, and Kentucky farmer, was at that protest as well, and he read his poem “[Questionnaire](#),” which included these provocative and prophetic lines:

How much poison are you willing / to eat for the success of the free / market and
global trade? / Please / name your preferred poisons.... / State briefly the ideas,
ideals, or hopes, / the / energy sources, the kinds of security, / for which you
would kill a child. / Name, please, the children whom / you would be willing to
kill.”

If you are interested in learning more about what steps we might take to mitigate our climate crisis, I encourage you contact Sandi Smith-Gill about becoming part of our Green Sanctuary Team. But for now, in two sentences, let me say: I bring water from the Ohio River. And I bring to UUCF the stories have heard of environmental injustices, and a commitment to help lesson the effects of climate change.

If you feel led to do so, I invite you to come forward now, say your name, and share in one sentence where the water comes from and in a second sentence what you are bringing to UUCF as a result of being shaped by the place from which that water comes.

⁴ For a more detailed account of the rally, see “On banks of Ohio River, UUs rally for clean energy,” available at <http://blogs.uuworld.org/ga/2013/06/20/on-the-banks-of-the-ohio-river-uus-rally-for-clean-energy/>.

For Further Reading

- Carl Gregg, “Water Communion: ‘A River Runs through It’” (September 10, 2012), available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/09/water-communion-a-river-runs-through-it/>.