

## A Fish Out Of Water

It's a sunny Sunday afternoon, and I'm crying and screaming at my mother. We have been discussing the TV show "The Big Bang Theory," particularly the character of Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon is characterized by the symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome: he's an incredibly neurotic theoretical physicist and comic book nerd with about as much social grace as a mechanical pencil. I'm thankfully not as socially dysfunctional as Sheldon, but I can relate to his neuroses and his difficulty understanding other people's emotions. While the other characters on the show often find him insufferable, I feel like I could get along with him; I know how to speak his language. My mother on the other hand only sees him as a character who is insulting, egotistical, and inconsiderate. She hates the show because she can't tolerate the way that Sheldon treats the other characters. I try to explain how Sheldon isn't trying to be mean or obnoxious, how it isn't his intention to hurt those around him, that his brain is just wired in such a way that he doesn't understand how to be nice, or what it even really means to be nice. My mother says "You always have a choice to be nice"—a comment which I take very personally. I protest, but she doesn't listen, and I run off to my room, screaming behind me "It's not a choice. It's not a choice. It's not a choice."

I'm hearing a bit of my mother in David Foster Wallace's "Kenyon Commencement Speech," the main point of which is that we must make conscious, deliberate choices about how we think. He sums up his philosophy thusly:

In the twenty years since my graduation, I have come ... to see that the liberal arts cliché about 'teaching how to think' was actually shorthand for a very deep and important truth. 'Learning how to think' really means learning how to exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think. It means being conscious of and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed. (358)

Wallace's words have a grandiose yet raw sense of importance about them, and in my opinion he touches upon many significant truths in the course of his writing. His messages of skepticism and critical thinking resonated very strongly with me, but the most interesting thing about “Kenyon Commencement Speech” for me was the assertions it made towards its audience, which offered an interesting window into how other people think. Wallace says that “the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that hardest to see and talk and talk about” (355), and explains that our everyday failure to acknowledge these realities brings us great suffering. To illustrate this idea, Wallace uses the metaphor of a pair of fish who have never heard of water because they never stopped to think about what they were swimming in: they just swam. A lot of people seem to live their lives like this, but I see things very differently. Much like Sheldon, I take a much more analytical approach to things. To extend Wallace's metaphor, I consider myself to be a fish out of water: Wallace's ubiquitous realities are anything but obvious to me, and I'm forced to be painfully aware of them. Wallace's ideas therefore struck a very personal chord with me: what he gives as abstract life advice, I'm forced to live every waking minute.

However, despite my personal appreciation for his ideas, I'm going to follow Wallace's own advice and try to look at this issue from a more universal perspective. I think that Wallace puts forth a commendable philosophy in his speech, and in a perfect world, many would probably be profoundly influenced by what he has to say. However, I'd be very surprised if too many people are able or willing to follow Wallace's advice. Wallace never considers the possibility that choices concerning one's own thoughts and feelings may be literally impossible for some people—as a similar choice was for Sheldon and I.

Wallace first emphasizes the importance of choice where he expresses with incredulity, “As if a person's most basic orientation toward the world were somehow automatically hard-wired... As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice, of conscious decision”

(357). I would argue that all of these “as if”s are actually true, at least to a limited extent. After all, we begin experiencing the world as infants, long before we have the comprehensive skills necessary to contemplate questions as profound as how we are to construct meaning from what we experience. Our minds have to start somewhere before they grow into devices developed enough to consciously change themselves. I won't go as far as to make an assertion about where this initial mindset comes from, but I imagine that the answer is unimaginably complicated, involving a combination of genetics, prenatal and postnatal environmental factors, and our early exposure to experiences, ideas, and language. Details aside, it's clear that our minds do not spring forth from the ether fully formed: they are built from the world around us.

Wallace himself supports this idea with his concept of “our default setting, wired into our boards at birth” (357), but he claims that we must somehow break out of our default setting and take a more mature approach to matters. I feel that in this regard Wallace, like many academics, has an overly idealistic view of the human mind's practical capacity to learn and grow. The fundamental assumption (considered to be so obvious that it often remains unstated) behind education is that students are capable of learning. In most cases this is true, especially when “learning” refers solely to the absorption and comprehension of course material. From an instructor's perspective, the rejection of this idea is simply not a valid option: one cannot effectively teach a class while holding the belief that a student cannot learn. Some subjects and ideas will more difficult for some people to assimilate than others, but overall the truth holds that human brains have the ability to learn to do new things.

However, this freedom to mentally expand is lessened when the ideas we expect students to accept are more deeply affecting than a math equation or a rule of grammar. Sometimes the mindset we develop as infants is a flexible one, capable of considering alternative paradigms and perhaps even changing itself to adopt them. However, in my experience people are often either unable or cripplingly unwilling to change the way they see the world from the way they saw it when they were young.

Wallace acknowledges the repugnance of an authority figure (himself) attempting to impose values upon students—“But please don't worry that I'm getting ready to preach to you about compassion or other-directness or all the other so-called virtues. This is not a matter of virtue” (358) —but fails to consider that choice and conscious decision is itself a virtue. The distinction between values and making choices about values is not a useful one in my opinion, because choices must themselves be rooted in values. In other words, he seems to establish a false dichotomy between the process of thinking and the process of deciding how to think—but what is a decision if not the result of thinking?

While I can imagine someone reading Wallace's words and having an epiphany of sorts about their life, I can just as easily imagine someone disregarding it. Wallace acknowledges the existence of this default setting, but like my mother he does not acknowledge the corollary: that some people's default setting is not one that permits change; that some people can't see things differently without completely losing who they are; that truly unconscious processing does not acknowledge its own existence. To imply that every person is capable of choosing for themselves how to think is, in my opinion, to suggest a level of mental discipline and self-awareness that I doubt too many people are capable of. If people were to listen to Wallace and actually take his advice, the world would probably be a better place. Sadly, Wallace fails to acknowledge the main reason why he even has to give the speech in the first place: sometimes the mind insidiously doesn't let itself have a choice. Sometimes a fish can't get out of—or on my case, into—the water.

## Works Cited

Wallace, David Foster. "Kenyon Commencement Speech." *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* 2006. Ed. Dave Eggers. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 355-364. Print.