

‘Plain old untrendy troubles and emotions’

Adapted from ‘This is Water’ Speech

By [David Foster Wallace](#)

Originally Published on *The Guardian*, which can be found at [here](#).

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老生常谈的那些事

David Foster Wallace是美国同时代最有才华的作者之一，在这篇演讲中，他反思了日常生活的艰难：“能够在这大地上活到30岁，50岁，而不会有想要一枪把自己毙了的冲动”并没有想象中的那么容易。

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两条小鱼在水中游弋，恰巧迎面游来了一条老鱼。老鱼向他们点头致意，问候道：“嘿！伙计们！这水感觉如何？”那两条小鱼继续游了一会儿，其中一条终于忍不住停下来，瞪大了眼睛问同伴：“水他妈是什么玩意儿？”

你可别以为我是要以那条睿智大鱼的身份来解释水到底是什么。我并不是那条智慧的老鱼。这个故事最直接明显的寓意，是那些最显而易见，无所不在，而富有意义的事实，往往是最难以发现与谈论的。这句话一说出口，便难免沦为陈词滥调。但实际上，在日常生活的细枝末节，陈词滥调却可谓极其重要。这听起来可能像是危言耸听或者胡说八道，下面我们就来具体讲讲。

绝大部分我不假思索便确信的事情，到头来却是大错特错的假象。有个例子可以体现这种不假思索的绝对错误：我所有直接的感官经验都让我深信，自己是宇宙的绝对中心，是最为真实生动而举足轻重的存在。迫于社会压力，我们很少谈论这种自然而本质的自我中心，但从本性上来讲我们皆是如此。天性使然，如同系统的默认设置，与生俱来且根深蒂固。试想，没有哪怕是一小段经历不是以你自己为绝对中心的。在你感知这个世界的过程中，世界就正在你的面前，你的身后，你的左边或是你的右边，在你的电视或是你的显示屏里，不管在哪儿吧。他人的想法与感受唯有通过交流才能为你所接收，而你自己

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?”

If you’re worried that I plan to present myself here as the wise old fish explaining what water is, please don’t be. I am not the wise old fish. 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. 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 life-or-death importance. That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense. So let’s get concrete.

A huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. 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 centre of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centredness, because it’s so socially repulsive, but it’s pretty much the same for all of us, deep down. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you’ve had that you were not at the absolute centre of. The world

as you experience it is right there in front of YOU, or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV, or YOUR monitor, or whatever. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real - you get the idea. But please don't worry that I'm getting ready to preach to you about compassion or other-directedness or the so-called "virtues". This is not a matter of virtue - it's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centred, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self.

By way of example, let's say it's an average day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging job, and you work hard for nine or ten hours, and at the end of the day you're tired, and you're stressed out, and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for a couple of hours and then hit the rack early because you have to get up the next day and do it all again. But then you remember there's no food at home - you haven't had time to shop this week, because of your challenging job - and so now, after work, you have to get in your car and drive to the supermarket. It's the end of the work-day, and the traffic's very bad, so getting to the store takes way longer than it should, and when you finally get there the supermarket is very crowded, because of course it's the time of day when all the other people with jobs also try to

的却总是那么直接，迫切，而真实，仿佛触手可及。我想你们明白我的意思了。但请不要担心，我并没打算向你们宣扬要同情他人，以他人立场出发，或是鼓吹所谓的美德。这不是美德的问题，这关乎我所做的选择：选择是否要改变乃至摆脱我脑子里的默认设定——极度的自我中心，以自我的视角去观察并诠释一切。

举个例子，设想平常的一天，早晨你从床上爬起来，开始繁重的工作。忙碌了九、十个小时，你在一天快结束时疲惫不堪，只想赶紧回家享用一顿晚餐，把紧绷的弦松个把小时然后早早上床睡觉。因为你明天还要早起并重复这一切。但这时你突然想起来家里的冰箱已经空了。因为工作繁重，你还这周没来得及抽出时间买菜。于是现在，下班以后，你只好上车准备开去超市。因为是下班高峰期，去超市的时间比理论上要久了很多。当你终于进了超市，里面却又异常拥挤，毕竟别人也都想趁着这时候挤进超市买菜。超市里的灯光惨不忍睹，背景音乐不堪入耳，反正这里简直是你最不想呆的地方。但你也没法速战速决，你不得不逛遍所有拥挤而过亮的走道才能找到你想要的东西，还得在那些和你一样疲惫匆忙的人之间调动那小破手推车。人群中不伐步履蹒跚的老人，占地儿的

胖子和四处乱窜挡住你去路的小孩。可你还得咬着牙，礼貌地请求借过。最后，你终于把晚餐的食材找齐了，问题是虽然这会儿大家都急着结帐离开，但是收银台的数目根本不够。每一个收银台前都排出了长长的队，这真是让人恼火。可你又不能把气撒在那个手忙脚乱已经抓狂的收银员身上。

不管怎样，你现在终于来到了付款处，付了钱，等着机器验证你的支票或是银行卡。一个毫无生气的声音对你说：“祝您今天愉快”。然后你推着塞满了大包小包的购物车穿过拥挤不堪、坑坑洼洼、满是垃圾的停车场，再把所有的袋子塞进车子，省着它们在回家路上掉出来，滚得满哪儿都是。之后你又要又在高峰时间开回家，一路上全是SUV，交通十分拥堵。

squeeze in some grocery shopping, and the store's hideously, fluorescently lit, and infused with soul-killing Muzak or corporate pop, and it's pretty much the last place you want to be, but you can't just get in and quickly out: you have to wander all over the huge, overlit store's crowded aisles to find the stuff you want, and you have to manoeuvre your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts, and of course there are also the glacially slow old people and the spacey people and the kids who all block the aisle and you have to grit your teeth and try to be polite as you ask them to let you by, and eventually, finally, you get all your supper supplies, except now it turns out there aren't enough checkout lanes open even though it's the end-of-the-day rush, so the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating, but you can't take your fury out on the frantic lady working the register.

Anyway, you finally get to the checkout line's front, and pay for your food, and wait to get your cheque or card authenticated by a machine, and then get told to "Have a nice day" in a voice that is the absolute voice of death, and then you have to take your creepy flimsy plastic bags of groceries in your cart through the crowded, bumpy, littery parking lot, and try to load the bags in your car in such a way that everything doesn't fall out of the bags and roll around in the trunk on the way home, and then you have to drive all the way home through slow, heavy, SUV-intensive rush-hour traffic, etc, etc.

The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing comes in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm going to be pissed and miserable every time I have to food-shop, because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me, about my hunger 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 god-damn people.

Or if I'm in a more socially conscious form of my default setting, I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic jam being angry and disgusted at all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUVs and Hummers and V12 pickup trucks burning their wasteful, selfish, 40-gallon tanks of gas, and I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustingly selfish vehicles driven by the ugliest, most in-

我想说的是, 当这样琐碎而令人沮丧的倒霉事发生时, 我所说的选择就排上用场了。交通堵塞, 拥挤的过道和等待付款的长队让我有时间思考。而如果不我去有意识地决定思考的方式和关注的焦点, 那么每次买菜就会变成烦躁而又悲惨的经历。因为我本性的默认设定便确信像这样的情形都是针对我的, 我那么饿, 那么累, 那么想回家, 但好像全世界都跟我过不去, 到底都是什么人跟我过不去啊? 看看他们站在队里等待付款的样子是多么令人厌恶, 多么愚蠢, 像蠢牛一样睁着死鱼眼, 完全没有人样。瞧瞧那些队伍里大声打手机的人是多么粗鲁而让人恼火, 再瞧瞧这一切是多么的不公平: 我辛苦工作了一整天, 都快累垮饿晕了。可都怪这些愚蠢的混蛋, 我居然没有办法回家吃饭和休息。

如果我的默认设定处在一种更具有社会觉悟的状态中, 那么每当晚高峰时面对着那些巨大蠢笨挡路的SUV、悍马、V12小货车, 想着它们自私浪费地消耗的40加仑汽油, 我都气不打一处来。我沉浸在一个很讽刺的事实中: 那些保险杠上贴着爱国或是宗教标语的都是最巨大, 恶心, 自私的车辆, 里面开车的都是最丑陋, 蛮横, 咄咄逼人的司机, 他们一边打着电话一边为了区区20英尺而在堵塞的交通中

加塞儿。我可以想像我们的后代将如何鄙视我们, 我们这些令人扫兴的白痴不但浪费了未来的燃料, 而且很可能把气候也搞得一团糟。这一切是多么操蛋。

如果我选择以这种方式思考, 很好, 很多人都这样——只是这样想已经变得如此容易如此自然, 以至于那都算不上选择。这样思考是我的天生的默认设定。当我想当然而无意识地运行着我的默认设置——把自己当作世界的中心, 将自己即刻的需求和感受当作这世上最值得关注的事情——我便下意识地感受到了成人世界最无聊沮丧且拥挤不堪的部分。问题在于, 其实还可以用截然不同的方式去看待这些情景。交通堵塞的时候, 无数的车一动不动地挡在我前面。也许事情是这样的, 有的人可能曾经历过严重的车祸, 对驾驶产生了严重的心理阴影。医生只好建议他们开像SUV这样的大车, 才能让他们有足够的安全感。或者, 可能开那辆悍马插到我前面的是一位父亲, 他身旁的副驾驶座上是生病或者受伤的孩子。他正心急如焚地赶去医院, 那才是正经的大急事儿, 比我的要紧多了——说起来其实是我挡了人家的路。

considerate and aggressive drivers, who are usually talking on cell phones as they cut people off in order to get just 20 stupid feet ahead in a traffic jam, and I can think about how our children's children will despise us for wasting all the future's fuel and probably screwing up the climate, and how spoiled and stupid and disgusting we all are, and how it all just sucks ...

If I choose to think this way, fine, lots of us do - except that thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic it doesn't have to be a choice. Thinking this way is my natural default setting. 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 centre 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, all these vehicles stuck and idling in my way: it's not impossible that some of these people in SUVs have been in horrible car 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 much bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am - it is actually I who am in HIS way.

Again, 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-up 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 Dept 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 - if you want to operate on your default setting - then you, like me, 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 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. Not that that mystical stuff's necessarily true: the only thing that's capital-T True is that

正如之前提到的，我并不是要给你们道德上的建议，也不是说你们应当以这种方式思考，或者有人希望你能主动这么做。因为这样做很难，需要毅力和精神上的努力。如果你像我一样，有时候你做不到这样，或者干脆就不乐意。但大多数时候，如果你意识到你可以给自己选择的机会，你便可以以不同的眼光去看待这个体态臃肿、眼神黯淡、浓妆艳抹的女士。她正在结账队伍里冲着她的小孩大吼大叫。也许她平常不是这个样子，可能她在医院里握着垂死的得了骨癌的丈夫的手，已经三天三夜没合眼。也许这位女士是汽车店里的低薪职，昨天刚刚做个人情帮你的爱人解决了恼人的繁文缛节。当然，这都是不太可能发生的事，但也同样不是完全不可能——一切都取决于你打算怎样去想。如果你很自然地认为你知道事实是怎么样，谁和什么是真正重要的，如果你只想靠着默认设定思考，那么，你就会像我一样，不去考虑那些并不是毫无意义和烦人的可能性。不过，当你真正了解了如何思考，如何关注，你就知道你还有其他的选择。这是你力所能及的——将一个嘈杂、喧闹，缓慢、消费者虐待式的情景变成一段不但有意义还庄严神圣的体验，如同同情、爱以及将万物联结起来的力量一样激动人心。也不是说这些神秘的玩意儿就一定是真的：唯一的绝对真理却是你需要决定自己将如何看待这一切。你需要有意识地决定什么有意义的而什么没有，你需要决定什么值得崇拜。

因为其他的事情也会被人看作真理。在成人日常生活的细枝末节，所谓的无神论是不存在的，也没有所谓的不崇拜。每个人都在崇拜。我们唯一剩下的选择是崇拜的对象。而选择某种形式的神和精神层面的东西——比如耶稣基督或是安拉，耶和华或是地母神，四圣谛或者其他不可违背的道德准则——去崇拜的一个重要原因，便是其他的崇拜对象都会将你侵蚀殆尽。如果你崇拜金钱和物质，如果你把它们当作生活意义的来源，那么你总是无法满足，你总会觉得匮乏。这就是事实。如果你崇拜自己的身体，美丽和性感，你将被丑陋困扰，当岁月流逝青春不复的过程中，你将痛不欲生直至被彻底压垮。从一个层面来讲，我们早就知道这个道理了——它早被整理成了神话，谚语，陈词滥调，套话，警句，预言：每一个传奇的梗概。而诀窍在于将真理维持在日常的意识之中。崇拜权力，你将感到弱小和恐惧，你总是渴求更大的权力去支配别人，以躲避心中的恐惧。崇拜自己的智能，想被视为聪明，你将最终发现自己的愚蠢，自欺欺人，总是在被人拆穿的边缘如履薄冰。

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. You get to decide what to worship.

Because here's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship - be it JC or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles - is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things - if they are where you tap real meaning in life - then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already - it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power - you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart - you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

The insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the centre of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But 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. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the "rat race" - the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.

I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly in-

这些形式的崇拜的险恶并不在于它们是罪恶的，而在于它们都是无意识的。它们就是默认设定，你日渐陷入的崇拜。当你对所接触的世界和判断价值的尺度变得越来越挑剔，实际上你却毫无意识自己正在做什么。而这个世界也不会设法阻止你这样的默认设置上运行，因为这个由人，金钱，权力为主体的世界，在恐惧，羞辱，失落，渴求和自我崇拜的驱动下近乎完美地运作着。我们当下的文化早已驾驭这些力量并从中创造了惊人的财富，安逸和个人自由。那种自由让我们能够君临自身躯壳大小的王国，孤独地处在所有造物的中心。这种自由确实令人垂涎向往。但自由有很多不同的种类，而其中最宝贵的自由却在这个强调胜利，成就，炫示的辉煌外在世界中着实鲜见，很少被提及。真正重要的自由包含关注，觉悟，节律和努力，以及能够去关心他人并为他们奉献，坚持不断，在无尽细微渺小之处以并不时髦的方式，千千万万遍，一点一滴累积至无数。那才是真正的自由。另外一种选择则是对生活浑浑噩噩毫无知觉，以默认设定运作，在世俗世界中无止境地竞争，因得失痛苦不堪。

我知道这听起来也许不是那么有趣和令人欢快，也不怎么鼓舞人心。

但就我所见而言，这便是抛开所有扯淡的修辞包装以后的真相。当然，这件事你可以爱怎么想就怎么想。但请不要把这和指手画脚的Laura博士的大道理一样不当回事。我所说的这一切和道德，宗教，教条无关，跟关于死后生命的问题也毫无关系。真正的真理关乎死亡之前在这大地上的生命。真正的真理让我们能够在这大地上活到30岁，50岁，而不会有想要一枪把自己毙了的冲动。这不过与意识和觉悟有关——意识到隐藏在我们平常视野里那些最真实而不可缺少的。为了这一切，我们必须不断提醒自己，不断提醒自己：“这便是水，这便是水。”

spirational. What it is, so far as I can see, is the truth with a whole lot of rhetorical bullshit pared away. Obviously, you can think of it whatever you wish. But please don't dismiss it as some finger-wagging Dr Laura sermon. None of this is about morality, or religion, or dogma, or big fancy questions of life after death. The capital-T Truth is about life before death. It is about making it to 30, or maybe 50, without wanting to shoot yourself in the head. 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."

Adapted from the commencement speech the author gave to a graduating class at Kenyon College, Ohio