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The Ellen Miller ’55 Endowment for Theater Productions
BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN

by david foster wallace

directed and adapted by daniel fish
set design by laura jellinek
costume design by andrea lauer
lighting design by bruce steinberg
sound design by ian turner

production staff

production stage manager ........................................ alexandra rozansky
assistant production stage manager ........................ emily morris
assistant stage managers ......................................... benjamin ross desch/video
cameraman ......................................................... christopher futia/sound
lights ................................................................. camber hansen-karr/lights
set ................................................................. w. spencer klubben/run crew
props .............................................................. ingrid koch/props
sound ............................................................... penina rubin/run crew
master electrician ................................................ ashley nguyen
assistant m.e. ...................................................... cassandra donatelli
audiovisual engineer ........................................... bruce stockton
assistant ave ....................................................... kevin brice
assistant director ................................................ meridel phillips

This production has been made possible through the combined efforts of ENG 170 & 270 (Technical & Advanced Technical Theatre), ENG 172 (Intro to Stage Lighting and Sound), and ENG 290 (Plays in Production)
This essay, like all those that follow (except for DFW’s Kenyon platitudes of day-to-day life. David Foster Wallace; the production of the same egregious Men and very complicated and hard to talk about. The reader and the writer that’s very strange other level that a piece of fiction is a convergence of it comes as a welcome relief. Wallace’s use of the relationship between reader and text, along with his intensely felt narrative expressed in words. Like I had just looked through an album of photos taken as if you were reading it naturally.

Bruce Steinberg (Lighting Design) has designed for companies such as VisionIntoArt, Collage Dance Theatre, LeeSaar the Company, and Adrienne Truscott, in venues ranging from a Soho laundromat to Italian concert halls. Recent work includes: Her’s a Queen (Neal Medlyn at DTW), wonder (NYU TSOA Graduate Acting Department), Art of Memory (Company SoGoNo at 3LD), The Screens (The Screens Project at Riverside Theatre), Art of Memory (Company SoGoNo), Blue Before Morning (terraNOVA Collective at the 44+R), and The Philadanderer (NYU TSOA Graduate Acting Department). He received his MFA from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Design for Stage & Film in 2010. Bruce was also a founding board member of Salem Art Works, a new art colony and sculpture park, where he lit Mark di Suvero’s For Euler (1997) and Double Tetractyon (2004) for July 4th 2005 and 2006. Other visual art installations include Keren Cytter’s A Lesson in French (choreographed by Emma Grace Skove-Epps, Triskelion Arts 2010) and composed music/sound design for Orpheus L(y)re in which he also played the role of Orpheus (On the Road Premiere, New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, Acting Department), and starred in Raul and Marie’s Adventures on the Vernal Equinox (a silent, musical, romantic comedy cult film, 2009). He composed/arranged and musically directed the score for Kock Fight Club (an adaptation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, directed by Daniel Fish, Richard B. Fisher Center for Performing Arts, 2008). He composed and musically directed the score for Carol Churchill’s The Skriker (directed by Nat Kuczintz, Bard College, 2008). With musical partner, Daniel Bieber, Mr. Turner created the score for The Skriker (Women’s Project, NYC) and costumes for a new theatrical-Hysteric Theatre, 2010). Mr. Turner wrote, directed and starred in Raul.

Andrea Lauers (Costume Design) Broadway Debut: American Idiot, Off-Broadway, The Butcher of Brooklyn (Second Stage Uptown). Other NYC credits: Status Entropos (multimedia dance performance: NYC and Thessaloniki, Greece), NYU’s Our Lady of 112th Street, Hair. Regional: several Alley Theatre productions, including Black Comedy, Wait Until Dark, Glengarry Glen Ross, The Crucible, After the Fall, Steel Magnolias, Fully Committed. Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, The Thirteenth Chair, The Woman in Black, and And Then There Were None: Her current projects include Or (Women’s Project, NYC) and costumes for a new musical, The Trey McIntyre Experience. Her designs have been featured in Theatre magazine, published by Yale School of Drama, and most recently included in Fashionable Technology by Sabine Seymour. She is a recipient of the Baryshnikov Fellowship, and holds an MFA from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Design for Stage and Film.

The Thirteenth Chair (directed by Susanna Gellert, Fischer Center for Performing Arts, 2007). Mr. Turner studied composition under Joan Tower, and worked as a TA for the late Maryanne Amacher in sound installation composition.

Much of my initial response to the Brief Interviews book was related to the fact that I delved into it thinking of it as a dramatic piece, rather than simply a collection of short stories which is what it is... I expected a lot from it that simply did not deliver, like standard theatrical instructions. It’s ironic. Characters too might have been a good start. Instead, I got what at first looked like a thrown-together heap of strange stories, mock interviews, tangle met-analysis pop quizzes, and dreams like futuristic accounts that often felt the feeling more like I had just looked through an album of photos taken by an autistic person, rather than having read any coherent narrative expressed in words. It’s strange, because with David Foster Wallace, it’s all about the world. And it’s a compliment to his ability that he can manipulate words so well that they seem to transcend language itself. The man was a literary genius not because of his unique, ironic, post-modern style, or his hilarious (while sometimes disturbing) wit—though these both deserve credit. What he had was a rare kind of pull. I think we’ve all, at some point or another, sufficiently gotten to know the feeling of being so isolated that the acknowledgement of it comes as a welcome relief. Wallace’s use of the relationship between reader and text, along with his intensely varied use of literary styles that are often juxtaposed or eloquently intermixed, can be liberating. Or overwhelming. Usually both.

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personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the centre of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsensy ways every day.

That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, 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 inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. What it is, as far as I can see, is the capital-T Truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical niceties stripped away. You are, of course, free to think of it whatever you wish. But please don’t just dismiss it as just some finger-wagging Dr Laura sermon. None of this stuff is really 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 the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, 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. And it commences: now.

I wish you way more than luck.

Daniel Fish (Director) is a stage director based in New York City and Berlin. He began his career directing the plays of Shakespeare and Molière and in recent years has made new work from sources as varied as Elliott Smith’s album From A Basement On A Hill, and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma. He has directed plays by Chekhov, Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Clifford Odets, Charles L. Mee, Sarah Ruhl, David Rabe, Roland Schimmelpfennig and Sheila Callaghan. In New York City, his work has been produced by Signature Theatre, Classic Stage Company, HERE, and at The Zipper (where his production of True Love opened in 2001). He has also created work for Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, Yale Repertory Theatre, the McCarter Theatre, The Shakespeare Theatre/Washington DC, and California Shakespeare Theater. Daniel Fish has taught directing at The Yale School of Drama, Princeton University, University of California at San Diego, and at Bard College.

Laura Jellinek (Set Design). Recent theater projects include The Really Big Once (David Herskovits, Target Margin Theater), Buddy Cop 2 (Oliver Butler, The Debate Society), Iron (Deborah Block, Theatre Exile, Philadelphia), The Cocktail Party (Scott Alan Evans, The Actors Company Theater), The Journey of the Fifth Horse (Michael Sexton, NYU Graduate Acting), and Welcome to the Woods (Erwin Maas, International Theatre Laboratory Workshop). Recent designs for opera and dance include Così fan Tutte (Sam Helfrich, Delaware Valley Opera), Ghosts (Christopher Wheeldon, San Francisco Ballet) and Braving the New World (Rebecca Davis Dance Company, Philadelphia). MFA: NYU.

Performed by...

In alphabetical order

John Amir-Fazli
Annalise Baird
Kelsey Burritt
Alexander Cox
Grace Interlichia
Ellie Law
Laura Nichols
Jacqueline O’Donnell
Elizabeth O’Neill
DAVID FOSTER WALLACE:

OR, "IRONY IS THE SONG OF A BIRD THAT HAS COME TO LOVE ITS CAGE."

Born in 1962, in Ithaca, NY, David Foster Wallace grew up in Champaign, IL, where his father was a philosophy professor. His mother was also a professor (of English) at the nearby Parkland College. Wallace himself studied English and Philosophy at Amherst College before going on to receive an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona.

His first book, The Broom of the System, was published in 1987. Wallace later wrote (in a letter to his friend, the writer Jonathan Franzen) that the book came off like it was "written by a very smart fourteen-year-old." Regarded by most critics as highly innovative and post-modern because of its non-linear plot, as well as Wallace's experimental approach with his book (the novel ends mid-sentence), it was well received despite his later misgivings about it. Broom established Wallace as a clever, creative and very versatile writer who could play easily with meta-fiction and irony, and whose philosophical background gave his writing a unique edge.

The post-publication attention pushed Wallace initially to Harvard to further his studies in philosophy, but by 1991 he had left philosophy behind to begin his career as a teacher. Emerson College in Boston welcomed him as an adjunct professor for a year, before he returned to his childhood Illinois to teach as an English professor at Illinois State University in Normal. It was at ISU that Wallace’s best-known work was born: the thousand-page, endnote-ridden, fame-procuring, and undeniably unique book that became Infinite Jest. This futuristic work follows several different plots, many of which can be traced back to its author’s life and interests. His inclusion of a tennis academy came from his own obsession with the sport; one of the parallel plotlines following ad

dicts in a halfway house reflects what he called (at the time) his own “stomach-level sadness,” an existential sort of “lostness,” characteristic of his generation.

In 2002 he became a professor of English at Pomona College, and met his future wife Karen Green. The pair were married in December 2004, shortly before Wallace was invited to deliver the commencement speech at Kenyon College, which was to become the book This Is Water. Some Thoughts, Delivered On A Significant Occasion, On Living A Compassionate Life.

You get the idea.

If I choose to think this way in a store and on the freeway, fine. Lots of us do. Except thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn’t have to be a choice. It is my natural default setting. It’s the automatic 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, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it’s not impossible that some of these people in SUV’s have been in horrible auto accidents in their youth and driving so terrifyingly that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy vehicle 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 get this kid to the hospital, and he’s in a 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 harder, more tedious and painful lives than I do. Again, please don’t think that I’m giving you moral advice, or that I’m saying you are supposed to think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it. Because it’s hard. It takes will and effort, and if you are 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 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 think the lady is to the world as a whole: just a person who has a job, or someone who has their own misfortunes in addition to yours?

Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide how you’re gonna try to see it.

This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted. 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 weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually 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 the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much everything 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 body and beauty and sexual allure and comfort and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. 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 crowed, 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.

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Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they’re evil or sinful, it’s that they’re unconscious. They are default settings.

There are other forms 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 so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and
least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger.

And I submit that this is what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts education is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out. That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense. Let’s get concrete. The plain fact is that you graduating seniors do not yet have any clue what “day in day out” really means. There happen to be whole, large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine and petty frustration. The parents and older folks here will know all too well what I’m talking about.

By way of example, let’s say it’s an average adult day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging, white-collar, college-graduate job, and you work hard for eight or ten hours, and at the end of the day you’re tired and somewhat stressed and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for an hour, and then hit the sack early because, of course, 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 the heart to shop for new groceries this week because of your challenging job, and eventually you 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 platitude can have a life or death importance, or so I wish to suggest to you on this dry and lovely morning.

Wallace was not that concerned with social norms or the public’s opinion of him (another strength of his, I think) and this fundamental indifference to the conventional comes through in a lot of his later work, including Brief Interviews With Hideous Men. That’s not to say he didn’t feel nervous about public appearances—he regularly made jokes about how public speaking made him perspire heavily!

He also gave numerous interviews, including one with David Lipsky of Rolling Stone during a five-day book tour for Infinite Jest. (The interview was never to make it into the magazine, but instead became Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself—an extended interview and semi-biography published in 2010.)

Wallace suffered from severe depression, a condition that began in his early 20s and which plagued him for most of his adult life. The all-consuming terror of the depressive informs directly and indirectly much of his work (even Infinite Jest was supposed to be “something sad”), but has often been interpreted as satirical or ironic. In September of 2008, Wallace committed suicide by hanging himself in the garage of his California home. Numerous memorials were held, most notably at Pomona, Amherst, University of Arizona and NYU.

Jonathan Franzen, who spoke at the NYU memorial, later told The New York Times: “He was as sweet a person as I’ve ever known and as tormented a person as I’ve ever known.”

This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger.
BUILDING BRIEF INTERVIEWS

little Brown and Company published Brief Interviews With Hideous Men in 1999. The work initially caught critics a little bit by surprise. As time went on, however, it garnered better reviews, but its unexplained mixture of formats, its sharp juxtaposition of detailed prose with minimal dialogue, of short stories with partial interviews, still puzzled many readers. As for the content, the Salon literary critic wrote:

Wallace, among his other talents, blends the languages of modern philosophy, sexual angst and suburban psychological breakdown in a way that manages both to be thoroughly new in literary terms, and yet still evoke in the reader that state of mind that all great literature evokes, that sense of encounter with phenomena long familiar and suddenly, perfectly identified.

That’s putting it nicely. Quite frankly, yes, it “evokes,” like all worthwhile art, but in this case that’s often just a euphemism for “disturbs” (and even “offends”). It’s important not to generalize here, however, and I have to note that not all the points in the book that have really struck a nerve in me have been upsetting ones. And even if they have, Wallace seems always to have a reason for including those particularly disturbing stories, even if it’s just to get the reader to face his or her own humanity.

At some point during our first week of rehearsal, Daniel [Daniel Fish, the director and adaptor of Brief Interviews] told us about a concert he attended at the Berlin Philharmonic that absolutely blew him away. It wasn’t the piece itself, or any individual orchestral section, but rather the group’s incredible ability as a whole to describe to the audience an almost unexpected experience—the idea that the whole thing might spiral out of control at any moment. And yet it all hung together, just by a thread, and delivered the audience safely to the other side. A true performance is never that simple. (If it were, you could just read Brief Interviews. —it’s a performance in and of itself.) So we’re here to un-prep you. It’s part of the basic questioning-of-assumptions that runs as a theme throughout the piece. Everything we’re doing here is based on questions. Questions like: why would Wallace choose to record himself doing readings of various pieces in the book, when he himself said that the work shouldn’t be spoken? Why, then, are we doing readings of various pieces in the book, when he himself said that anything can happen. You really have no idea what you just walked into. Sure, you can read the program, and that will give you some well-researched notes about the composer, the author, etc., but though you may learn some things in the process, that barely prepares you for what’s to come.

A true performance is never that simple. (If it were, you could just read Brief Interviews. —it’s a performance in and of itself.) So we’re here to un-prep you. It’s part of the basic questioning-of-assumptions that runs as a theme throughout the piece. Everything we’re doing here is based on questions. Questions like: why would Wallace choose to record himself doing readings of various pieces in the book, when he himself said that the work shouldn’t be spoken? Why, then, are we choosing to take that even further and speak the text out loud? What was Wallace’s opinion of the interviewer in the text, whose questions he purposefully leaves out? Do the questions give you more information about the questioner than the answerers do about the interviewee?

1 Interesting side note: the celebrated cover design for the original FSG edition of Brief Interviews... was designed by UR International Theatre Program alumnus, John Fulbrook III.
Q. Can you describe the experience that made you decide to be a director?  
Well, this is the story I always tell: when I was really young, maybe three or four, I was taken to see a play performed in a big barn. I sat on a window ledge in the barn. And I could see clearly from the window what was happening inside, but I could also see the actors outside changing costumes, putting on their makeup, and it sort of—defined a lot of things for me. I think that might have been part of the experience behind becoming a director. I think that [seeing both what's in front and behind our view of the world] has a lot to do with the way I look at things. One of the things I am always doing is asking questions. There is a maddening questioning of assumptions that you'll always get from me...as though I was looking at things from two conflicting points of view.

Q. What would you say is the appeal that directing has for you?  
Well [laughs], well, if I knew what that was...the appeal is creating something out of...nothing. Well, almost nothing. And when you think about it that's what any good piece of creative work should do. And that means you really have to do a lot of work, not research work, although sometimes it can be "traditional" research, but you have to do a lot of work to make that something. And the kind of [research] work depends on the piece, but often you're building something from the ground up. I suppose the theater is how I try to learn about the world, to figure out how things are, and that's very appealing to me.

Q. You talk a lot about the importance of spontaneity and chance. What's that about?  
Yeah, I think that performance and acting is so much about...discovery. About it [the action] happening for first time, every time. And, for the actor, I want them to be open to the possibility that anything could happen at any moment.

Q. What about your use of multimedia in this production—the use of video, for example?  
I resisted using [video] for years. And I think my disinterest in using it was so strong, that I eventually thought: why not just try it? And then I saw the work of Frank Capra in Berlin. What I saw was the use of live video on stage—one or several people would have a camera, filming action, that may or may not give the audience a new perspective of a room which is maybe otherwise hidden from them—so you could see sort of two things at once: what's actually in front of you, and what was on the screen. But it was all still live. So I wasn't watching a movie, I was watching what was actually happening right now. You were also not watching film-acting. You were watching theater-acting: an intense, big, theatrical performance, on video, which is a sort of theater...with a camera, film on stage. And I could see clearly from the window what was happening inside, but I could also see...and that's very appealing to me.

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I resisted using [video] for years. And I think my disinterest in using it was so strong, that I eventually thought: why not just try it? And then I saw the work of Frank Capra in Berlin. What I saw was the use of live video on stage—one or several people would have a camera, filming action, that may or may not give the audience a new perspective of a room which is maybe otherwise hidden from them—so you could see sort of two things at once: what's actually in front of you, and what was on the screen. But it was all still live. So I wasn't watching a movie, I was watching what was actually happening right now. You were also not watching film-acting. You were watching theater-acting: an intense, big, theatrical performance, on video, which is a sort of theatre...with a camera, film on stage. And I could see clearly from the window what was happening inside, but I could also see...and that's very appealing to me.

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Q. You talk a lot about the importance of spontaneity and chance. What’s that about?  
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If a writer does his job right, what he basically does is remind the reader of how smart the reader is. Make the reader up to stuff that the reader’s been aware of all the time.
Here 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 says “What the hell is water?” 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 and explain why the degree you have received 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 “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 scepticism 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 so 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 two people’s 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 was 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. His natural default setting, his unconscious bias, his true nature, is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me.

As I’m sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotised by the constant monologue inside your own head (may be happening right now). Twenty years after my own graduation, I have come 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.

There are these two things I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the most important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of basic self-centredness because it’s so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute centre of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

Please don’t worry that I’m getting ready to lecture you about compassion or other-directedness or all 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-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self. People who can adjust their natural default setting this way are often described as being “well-adjusted”, which I suggest to you is not an accidental term.

Given the triumphant academic setting here, an obvious question is how much of this work of adjusting our default settings has something to do with thinking? It is an obvious question, and it gets very tricky. Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education—least in my own case—is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualise stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me.

This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth. It is not the