



THE VIRTUE OF
TENDERNESS:
DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE AND
THE PRACTICE
OF LOVE

BY MEDI ANN VOLPE

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In 2005 David Foster Wallace gave the commencement address at Kenyon College. The speech, which has acquired the title “This is Water,” still makes the rounds on the Internet regularly.¹ When I first heard it, blaring from my computer while I was giving my daughters a bath, I was struck by how compelling it is, and how close Wallace comes to telling the graduating class of 2005 that to flourish in adulthood and make the most of their liberal arts education—well, they needed God.

Of course Wallace doesn’t quite say that, but his speech makes an excellent starting place for thinking about the virtue of tenderness and why it might have resonance in secular culture in these first decades of the twenty-first century. If we pay careful attention to what David Foster Wallace says, we find that he sets before his hearers two possibilities for their adult lives. On one hand, they can be swept along by the forces that drive the world of advancement and prosperity. On the other hand, they may develop the ability to resist its power, and instead to perceive in the trivialities of their everyday existence “the force that made the stars.”² Reading between the lines, we discover that caring for others also requires this kind of perception; Wallace suggests to his young listeners that the practice of love is the way forward, that learning how to think involves acquiring a freedom that reveals itself most fully in the exercise of tenderness.

Before I begin, I ought to admit freely what Wallace *does not* say, at least not explicitly. Wallace (1) never uses the word “tenderness,” though the care he describes is certainly tender; (2) refers only to “some god or spiritual-type thing” as the object of what he calls “worship,” without mentioning souls or their salvation; (3) denies that he is advocating any sort of “virtue” or morality; and (4) offers only the force of our will as the source of our resistance to the forces within and without that lead us deeper and deeper into the vicious cycle that Wallace does not name, but which Christians should instantly recognize as (5) idolatry.

I begin by describing the human predicament as David Foster Wallace sets it out in “This is Water,” paying careful attention to both the source of the problem and the solution he proposes. It may seem, given the provisos above, that I am reading rather a lot into Wallace’s speech. I can only show otherwise by drawing attention to four aspects of the speech—and by quoting Wallace extensively as I do so. First, Wallace nails the problem that we encounter in our adult lives: idolatry. As I have said, he doesn’t call it that; he describes the problem in rather different terms. Second, he hints at a kind of soul-training as the antidote to this particular poison, admitting freely how difficult it is, and how counter-cultural. Third, he suggests that one help in this soul-training is worship, devotion to something “spiritual.” Fourth, and perhaps most salient for what I want to say here, Wallace finds the evidence of the freedom of our souls from (what I will call) idolatry in the practice of tenderness.

After examining Wallace's speech, I turn to Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, comparing the two analyses of the human predicament and the manner of our release, giving its various aspects their theological names. Here the words Wallace avoids come back into the discussion: sin, idolatry, virtue, tenderness. Pope Francis identifies the malady more precisely (sin), and points directly to its cure (salvation in Christ).³



David Foster Wallace at a reading for Booksmith in 2006 (All Saints Church, San Francisco)

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David Foster Wallace on the Human Predicament

Wallace begins with a story about two young fish swimming along. They meet an older fish, who greets them: "Morning boys. How's the water?" The young fish swim on, and eventually one turns to the other and asks, "What the hell is water?" Wallace quickly reassures his audience that he is not the 'wise old fish' counselling the younger fish. Consistently refusing such a posture,

he insists throughout the speech that he's only talking about ordinary, daily-life sorts of things, and rehearsing "banal platitudes." One such truism is that "the most important and obvious realities are often the hardest to see and talk about."⁴

Among these fundamental truths is our mistaken assumption that we are the center of the universe—which is a perfectly natural assumption, actually, given our experience. Wallace explains that

everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the real-est, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness 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.⁵

Beginning from his own experience removes from his analysis any hint of a harangue. His tone is collegial and hortatory. This misguided judgment about our place in the universe is problematic, but usually invisible. It seems to be just the way we are. To make matters worse, the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default setting, 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 present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom.⁶

Wallace adds that this freedom only amounts to lordship over our own "tiny, skull-sized kingdoms." The inward spiral from self-centeredness into deeper and more myopic self-centeredness runs on the fear and anxiety that drive us to pursue ever more narrowly whatever we believe will protect or comfort us. The result is that we become "more and more selective about what [we] see

and how [we] measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what [we're] doing." Moreover, "the constant, gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing"⁷ intensifies our vulnerability to anxiety, fear, and habitual self-protection.

This process of inward spiralling goes together with what Wallace describes as a kind of default-setting worship. (Wallace only hints at the possibility of a life-giving worship, which I mention below.) He warns:

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. . . . The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid. . . . 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. . . . 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.⁸

It's difficult not to read into this an allusion to sin and idolatry. From the theologian's point of view, it is impossible not to see the resemblance between the bondage of our self-centeredness and Augustine's definition of sin: *homo incurvatus in se*. Sin turns us in on ourselves; we were not created thus. On such a reading, the longing Wallace describes is the desire for God, which resides in each human soul, and can only be satisfied by God. As we seek fulfilment elsewhere, our need only intensifies. In Wallace's anthropology, the person who turns to wealth or comfort or any earthly thing for security steps into an infinite cycle of longing and fear, in which what we have is never enough, and

we live in constant dread of losing it—whether it is respect, power, wealth, or sexual allure that we value. I am glad that David Foster Wallace has pointed this out in terms that have gained him access to audiences Pope Francis has yet (perhaps) to reach: this *is* the sickness that ails human creatures after the fall, and we need to be aware of it, in whatever guise it is presented to us.

Breaking the Cycle: Freedom, Worship, and Care

In the course of his speech, Wallace recasts the whole enterprise of the liberal arts education. "Learning how to think," he clarifies, "really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to. . . . Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed."⁹ Living by the illusion that we are at the center of the universe is as poisonous as it is natural. Survival in the world beyond graduation requires, on Wallace's reading, dislodging the self from the center of the universe and destroying the illusion that one's "immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities."¹⁰ But how? Three things emerge from Wallace's speech. First, the way out lies not in the grand gesture but in bearing the vexations of everyday life with humility. Second, in a way that might well have surprised his hearers on that warm morning in 2005, Wallace suggests that we make a conscious decision about how we worship. Third, when we attend properly to the everyday and to the transcendental, we find ourselves able to exercise care for others at a level that is at once totally trivial and absolutely essential.

With respect to the first, Wallace describes a concrete situation in which these new graduates may soon find

themselves: the dull and frustrating experience of a noisy and crowded grocery store at the end of a tiring day at work. At such times, it is easy to regard everyone else as somehow in the way of what we're trying to do: get our shopping done and get home. What lies outside our field of vision as their lives intersect with ours doesn't come into the picture. If we do allow it to occupy our imaginations, however, if we allow for the possibility that these other lives may involve endurance and courage, or circumstances of grief we might find unbearable, our perception changes. It's hard to do, Wallace freely admits, "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."¹¹ This is where everything is at stake for Wallace. Because "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."¹²

After Wallace drops this bombshell, the audience falls silent as he continues. What makes the difference in the supermarket checkout line, it turns out, is what we worship. "In the real world," Wallace insists, "there are no atheists; everybody worships." We don't have a choice about whether or not to worship; the only choice before us is *what* to worship. "And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship," he counsels, "is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive."¹³ Worship can thus be a deepening of the problem or a way out of the vicious cycle of self-centeredness. Do well-chosen objects of worship invite us to look up and out, to be aware of what's going on "inside [us]" and "in front of [us]," and so to learn to read the world around us and everyone in it charitably? Wallace implies as much, but here I suggest some specifically spiritual direction is in order.

Even if we cannot quite see how to accomplish this shift in perspective, Wallace suggests (third) that there is a standard by which we can measure our own freedom: care. Care is both the evidence of our freedom, and the program for the rehabilitation of our will (though Wallace doesn't put it exactly in those terms). The sort of freedom "that is most precious," he says,

you will not hear much talk about in the great outside world of wanting and achieving and displaying. 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 little unsexy ways every day.¹⁴

It is easy to forget that Wallace is talking about the value of a liberal arts education, that what he purports to be discussing here is how to think, how to behave like an educated person in the world. But he is: this is the freedom he is arguing that a liberal arts education is supposed to train you for—the freedom to imagine the world in such a way that you find yourself able to lay down your life for others every day.

What David Foster Wallace is after, it seems to me, is a sort of imaginative charity, a tenderness of mind and heart that makes space for the needs and concerns of others—even placing those needs above our own. But there is a piece missing. He is only half right about freedom. True, the freedom that really matters is not the freedom from constraints on our pursuit of pleasure or wealth. That kind of freedom is a freedom of attention that is incredibly difficult (by Wallace's own admission) to muster. And a liberal arts education is wholly unequal to the task of training us in the kind of thinking necessary for the achievement of the freedom Wallace teaches us to desire. The other half of the story about freedom is a story that David Foster Wallace cannot tell us: for that we need theological language, the language of sin and salvation and grace.

The Revolution of Tenderness

Wallace comes so close to grasping what ails us, but misses entirely what heals us. The exercise of care for others that Wallace describes is indicative and preservative of our freedom from the bondage of our own self-centeredness, but it isn't quite clear from his speech why that should be. Why is the freedom "truly to care for others" the "most precious"? He implies that caring for others, even "sacrificing" for them continuously and in hidden ways, is in some way salvific, but he doesn't elaborate.

When we name the ailment "sin," we see more easily the way it is overcome: not by our effort but by Jesus' life, Death, and Resurrection. I don't want to come across here as criticizing David Foster Wallace for failing to preach the Gospel accurately to those graduating seniors back in 2005. That's not the point. The point is that what he says suggests a kind of cultural intuition that we have a very deep need for grace. The hush of the audience from the word "sacred"—not to mention the airplay his speech still gets ten years on—suggests that he has hit a nerve. We might say that he poses a very good and resonant question to which Jesus is the answer.

Pope Francis delivers that answer—Jesus and the Gospel—in *Evangelii Gaudium*. There the malady that Christians call "sin" looks very much like the self-centeredness Wallace advises us is fatal: habitual selfishness has given rise to "a globalization of indifference" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §54).

Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us. (EG §54)

Pope Francis depicts this condition as starkly as David Foster Wallace does. "We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in own comforts," he writes. "Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide" (EG §272). Although the problem looks similar, the analysis differs. Whereas there is some slippage (understandably) in Wallace's account—about whether/to what extent the self-centeredness from which we suffer is 'hard-wired'—here the term *idolatry* comes into play (EG §55). It's what we sinful human beings do to secure ourselves in the world when we have forgotten that our only security comes from God. And it has only one antidote—not "will" or "effort" or "morality" or even "discipline," but *grace*.

Pope Francis is clear about the remedy for that which plagues our fallen human nature, and he leads with it. "God never tires of forgiving us," he announces; "Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed on us by this boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and start anew" (EG §3). Undoing the default setting that sets us on the way to what Wallace calls "unconsciousness," which I would call the death of the soul, isn't something that happens through dint of hard work. Discipline alone won't do it. The training of the soul for the kind of attention and awareness Wallace prescribes requires more than trying hard.

What eludes Wallace is obvious to the Pope and those of us who read him: escaping the bonds of sin and idolatry requires salvation, and a savior. Choosing "some god or spiritual-type thing to worship" becomes a whole lot simpler when a savior is in the line-up. As a result, there's a rock-solidness to the path Pope Francis maps out for us—and that is what is missing from Wallace's insightful and moving speech. We can agree with him wholeheartedly and remain unable to change. Pope

Francis draws on a long tradition of Christian theology and spirituality as he charts the way forward for the faithful. “When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts” (*EG* §272).

Here we find a tremendous difference between the Pope’s prescription and Wallace’s. For all his creative genius and wise sensitivity, Wallace’s diagnosis only suggests the vaguest hint of a way out. Pope Francis knows that attentive care for others is not an aimless or arbitrary therapy but that it implies a whole way of seeing the world. “Loving others,” he writes, “is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God” (*EG* §272). Love cannot be isolated from a whole way of living, a way of living that is inextricably bound to the Gospel: “one who does not love others ‘walks in darkness’ (1 Jn 2:11), ‘remains in death’ (1 Jn 3:14), and ‘does not know God’ (1 Jn 4:18)” (*EG* §272). The exercise of love is not occasional or optional; rather, “it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self” (*EG* §273).

Wallace avoids talking about faith or virtue, but we cannot understand the kind of love Pope Francis is discussing without these terms. Even Wallace comes close to the idea of faith when he refers to that which we worship as “where [we] tap real meaning in life.”¹⁵ What we trust to give worthiness to our lives, we worship. Or, we might put it, “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21). Wallace admonishes his hearers to find their treasure, so to speak, not in things that are perishable—money, things, sexual allure, intellect, power—but in something imperishable, spiritual, divine. When we place our trust in God and not elsewhere, our care becomes “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). Then our acts are not merely an expression of our success in adjusting our default setting, but become “works of love directed toward [our]

neighbour . . . the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit” (*EG* §37).

Pope Francis here draws on St. Thomas Aquinas, who “taught that the Church’s moral teaching has its own ‘hierarchy,’ virtues and in the acts which proceed from them. What counts above all else is ‘faith working through love’ (Gal 5:6)” (*EG* §37). To talk about faith and love is to talk about virtue.

“The foundation of the New Law is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is manifested in the faith which works through love.” Thomas thus explains that, as far as external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues: “In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies. This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree.” (*EG* §37)¹⁶

Far from being out of place in a discussion of the most precious kind of freedom, virtue is at its core. The care for others that Wallace recommends makes far more sense in the context of a robust account of the virtues. We love not arbitrarily, nor to save ourselves from the soul-destroying consumerism of our culture, but in response to the divine call. “The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness” (*EG* §88).

Pope Francis’ references to the Holy Spirit throughout *Evangelii Gaudium* offer the help that Wallace implies that we need if we are to maintain imaginative charity. To love properly, we need grace. First, we need grace because we fail. As Wallace rightly observes, re-adjusting our default setting is hard, and we don’t really want to do it. So we fail. In fact, we’re doomed to fail. If we recognize that our fallenness hampers us in the

quest for virtue, we have a better sense of what we're up against. Second, we need grace to get back up again once we have fallen. Third, even when we seem not to have failed, when we have loved and sacrificed to the very best of our ability, sometimes nothing appears to have changed. Works of mercy have not made any difference. At those times, too—perhaps especially then—we need grace. Pope Francis assures Christians “that all those who entrust themselves to God in love will bear good fruit. This fruitfulness is often invisible, elusive and unquantifiable. . . . Let us learn to rest in the tenderness of the arms of the Father amid our creative and generous commitment” (*EG* §279).



NOTES

1 The speech is available as a .pdf as well as in book form. I give page numbers from the transcription here, available at <<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>> Accessed 24 January 2015. I have made corrections based on the recording.

2 Wallace, “This is Water,” 8.

3 As an example of the way of life suggested by both David Foster Wallace and Pope Francis, I would offer L’Arche founder Jean Vanier, who has much to teach us as prophet and example of the virtue of tenderness.

4 Wallace, “This is Water,” 1.

5 *Ibid.*, 3.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, 8.

9 *Ibid.*, 4.

10 *Ibid.*, 7.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, 8.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 9.

15 *Ibid.*, 8.

16 Pope Francis cites St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] I–II, q. 108, a. 1 in the first instance and ST II–II, q. 30, a.4 in the second, citing further in the endnote: “We do not worship God with sacrifices and exterior gifts for him, but rather for us and for our neighbour. He has no need of our sacrifices, but he does ask that these be offered by us as devotion and for the benefit of our neighbour. For him, mercy, which overcomes the defects of our devotion and sacrifice, is the sacrifice which is most pleasing, because it is mercy which above all seeks the good of one’s neighbour” (ST, II–II, q. 30, a. 4, ad 1).



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