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BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN

FACE}

D3
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This production was made possible, in part, by the Ellen Miller ’55 Endowment for Theater Productions.
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
Christopher Futia/sound
Camber Hansen-Karr/lights
Lakiesha Holyfield/costumes
W. Spencer Klubben/run crew
Ingrid Koch/props
Penina Rubin/run crew

Master Electrician .................................................. Ashley Nguyen
Assistant M.E. .......................................................... Cassandra Donatelli
Audio/Visual Engineer ............................................. Bruce Stockton
Assistant Ave ............................................................ Kevin Brice
Assistant Director .................................................... Meridel Phillips

A Note About the Program

Program content is compiled by the production’s Assistant Director, Meridel Phillips, and edited by Nigel Maister. For a complete list of sources and works cited, please contact the Theatre Program. The program and its printing is supported in part by the UR English Department (“The Program Project”).

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)

Rafi Benjamin - Rory Blunt - Adam Brinkman - Benjamin Brown - Grace Cannon - Nikhil Chirumomula
Eric Cohen - Eric DeMeeo - Nina DeSoi - Cassandra Donatelli - Christopher Futia - Jake Gardner - Thane Green
Kobie Hamm - Camber Hansen-Karr - Samantha Hayes - William Hogan - Jonathan Isaacs - Alex Karpinski
John Killoran - Andrew Knight - Max Letacconneux - Michael Mayar - John Milks - Stefanie Milner - Laura Nicholas
Zhu Qiongsi - Penina Rubin - Li-Ya Sun - Franny Swanson - Jennifer Uvina - Eric Yeh - James Zino

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

By David Foster Wallace

The university of rochester international theatre program presents

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

Runs approximately 2 hours without intermission

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Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

Runs approximately 2 hours without intermission
Bruce Steinberg (Lighting Design) has designed for companies such as Vision-IntoArt, Collage Dance Theatre, LeeSaar the Company, and Adrienne Truscott, in venues ranging from a Soho laundromat to Italian concert halls. Recent work includes: He’s a Queer (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 D+R), and The Philanderer (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 May 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 Tetrahedron (2004) for July 4th 2005 and 2006. Other visual art installations include Keren Cytter’s Double Tetrahedron (2004) and Keren Cytter’s No Ghost, Just a Shell (2004). His attempt to relieve that frustrating isolation was one of the only ways he truly did connect with other people.

Ian Turner (Sound Design) is a composer, musical director, recording artist, film-maker, and performer. He recently assisted Philippe Parreno as a sound engineer for the video installations of No Ghost. Just a Shell and June 8, 1968 (Center for Curatorial Studies 2010). He performed as a dancer in A Lesson in French (choreographed by Emma Grace Skove-Epps, Triskelion Arts 2010) and composed music/sound design for Orpheus L(ive) in which he also played the role of Orpheus (Ontario Arts Council, 2010). Mr. Turner wrote, directed, 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 Skier (directed by Nat Kucinitz, Bard College, 2008). With musical partner, Daniel Bieber, Mr. Turner collaboratively composed and musically directed a original score for 3 Peter Weiss’s Marat/Sade (2007) by Susanna Gellert, Fischer Center, Bard College. He played the role of Curly in OK! (Oklahoma!) (directed by Daniel Fish, 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.
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....

This 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, unsexy 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.
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 that left them disabled and driving so terribly that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge amount of therapy 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’re tuned in to the other side of the world, and what you 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.

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 Wiccman Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much everything 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 youth 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. 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.

And 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 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-gradient 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 dinner because you’ve been too busy to think about it this week because of your challenging job, and you are merely that one that has to shop for the next day’s nourishment at the supermarket. It’s the end of the work day and the traffic is apt to be 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 squeeze in some grocery shopping. And the store is hideously 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, over-lit store’s confusing aisles to find the stuff you want and you have to manoeuvre your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts (et cetera, et cetera, cutting stuff out because this is a long ceremony) and eventually you get all your supplies, except now you have to wander all over the huge, over-lit store’s confusing aisles to find the stuff you want and you have to manoeuvre your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts (et cetera, et cetera).

Everyone here has done this, of course. But it hasn’t yet been part of you graduates’ actual life routine, day after week after month after year.

But it will be. And many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines besides. But that is not the point. The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in. So 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 gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop. Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About MY hungeriness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home, and that’s why I keep looking for something that I really need to do and then you have to drive all the way home through slow, heavy, SUV-intensive, rush-hour traffic, et cetera et cetera.

Everyone here has done this, of course. But it hasn’t yet been part of you graduates’ actual life routine, day after week after month after year.

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.

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 during 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 infor.ms 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.”

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1 DFZ: ZDT German TV interview, 2003
2 DFZ: letter to Jonathan Franzen, 1989
3 DFZ: the Salon interview on Infinite Jest, 1996
4 see page 8
5 DFZ: the Salon interview on Infinite Jest, 1996
7 see page 8

This, like many clichés, is 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.
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 GAINED BETTER REVIEWS, BUT ITS UNEXPLAINED MIXTURE OF FORMATS, ITS SHARP JUXTAPOSITION OF DETAILLED PROSE WITH MINIMAL DIALOGUE, OF SHORT STORIES WITH PARTIAL INTERVIEWS, STILL PUZZLED MANY READERS.

FOR THE CONTENT, THE SALON LITERARY CRITIC WROTE: WALLACE, AMONG HIS OTHER TALENTS, BLENDS THE LANGUAGE 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 EVOKE, THAT SENSE OF ENCOUNTER WITH PHENOMENA LONG FAMILIAR AND SUDDENLY, PERFECTLY IDENTIFIED.

THAT'S PUTTING IT NICELY. QUITE FRANKLY, YES, IT "EVOKE" 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 BROKE 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 ENDING NOTES. A GREAT PERFORMANCE, DANIEL SAID, LEAVES ONE WITH THAT BREATHTAKING IMPRESSION 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-CARRY 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 SPEAKEN? WHY, THEN, ARE WE CHOOSEING TO TAKE IT 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 ANSWERS DO ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE?

Q. Can you talk about what the actors are doing in this work? Is it, like, trying to find a balance between a flat reading of the text and more “traditional” acting?

WELL I WOULDN'T SAY IT'S NOT ACTING. I WOULD SAY THE ACT OF SPEAKING THE TEXT IS AN ACTION. THE STORY WE'RE TELLING IS BEING TOLD TO ONE EXTENT VERY INTERNALLY, AND TO ANOTHER EXTENT WHAT'S GOING OUT IS THEIR EFFORT TO DO IT. AND WHETHER IT'S ALL ONE, ALL THE OTHER, OR SOME COMBINATION OF THE TWO, THAT IS SOMETHING WE'RE WORKING ON. BUT THEY'RE NOT “CHARACTERIZING” THEY'RE NOT CREATING CHARACTERS BASED ON THE STORIES. THE ABSENCE OF THAT MAY MAKE IT VERY BORING—THAT'S THE FEAR, NOT HAVING A WELL-DEVELOPED PROTAGONIST.

Q. What about David Foster Wallace's writing do you think strikes you most, as a director, like directing material rather than purely a literary text?

I THINK WHAT STRIKES ME MOST ABOUT HIS WRITING, IS THE INCREDIBLE SENSE OF PRESENCE THAT HE BRINGS TO THE WORLD BEFORE HIM. THE HUGE SCOPE OF HIS IMAGINATION. AND THIS DEEP-HEARTED OPENNESS AND PRESENCE HE BRINGS TO EVERYTHING THAT SURROUNDS HIM. IT'S KIND OF MIND-BOGGLING, AND I THINK THAT KIND OF PRESENCE IS SOMETHING THAT'S THRILLING.
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 C. torf in Berlin. What I saw was the use of live video onstage—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 very strange thing. It just turned me on. And it probably makes a difference that I'm part of the first generation for which multitasking was something new. It's now part of how we work, like it or not: it's part of how we think; how we experience the world. Media is a part of our world, a big part. [But] I think there are many traps with video, too. It's moved from innovation, through convention, and now it's becoming a cliché.
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 says “What’s the hell is water?”

This is a standard requirement of US commencement addresses, most vitally and importantly for the human experience. We rarely think 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. 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 setting is about self-control or about learning something? The question 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-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract arguments 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.

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 gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for something much deeper, more serious: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being less reflexive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists’ problem is exactly the same as the story’s unbelievable: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up.

The point here is that I think this is one part of what teaching me how to think is really supposed to mean. To be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties. Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too.