



In the midst of the ordinary time (kronos), extraordinary time (kairos) happens.

Introduction

In a scene from Dead Poets Society, Professor John Keating challenges his boarding school English class. They sheepishly stand in front of the trophy case peering inquisitively into the photographs of alumna. The professor speaks with a deliberate tone about the boys in the faded black and white photographs:

They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you; their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it?

Carpe! Hear it?

Carpe! Carpe diem! Seize the day boys. Make your lives extraordinary.

Why does the call to live extraordinary lives ring so loudly for some they are compelled to follow it with a zealous passion? What causes the same call for others to become merely a drone to ignore amidst all the other noises of life? No matter where one falls on this continuum the call remains the same for every human being. Carpe diem! [Literally, pluck the day] Choose to live in such a way that reflects the extraordinariness of your life. Position yourself to get caught up in the great drama. You have been destined to make an impact.

Lifetime

The span of time that measures a person's life is referred to as a lifetime. Each person has a limited span of time to live. Yet each person is given the opportunity to leave a legacy which is about

contribution, significance, and things that really matter. Could there be two spans of time, whether recognized or not, which actually intersect?

Kronos (κρονος) is the ancient Greek word which refers to sequential or linear time. In Greek mythology, the god Chronos, pictured as elderly, gray-haired and bearded, was the personification of time. Kronos is symbolized by the newborn baby that ushers in the New Year and ends the year as a bent-over old man: Father Time. We know kronos time as chronology; tick-tock time. It is measured, or chronicled, by clocks, hours, minutes and seconds. It is the time in which we make appointments and face deadlines. It tends to be more of a nemesis or taskmaster than a friend. We schedule our lives by it. Most people speak of never having enough of it as we race around the clock to make sure we maximize the time. Some even refer to much of life as “putting in the time.”

Jonathan Larsen’s Broadway Musical Rent questions the measure of time, and parenthetically, the quality of kronos time with the lyrics of “Seasons of Love”:

Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand Six Hundred Minutes
How Do You Measure - Measure A Year?
In Daylights - In Sunsets
In Midnights - In Cups Of Coffee
In Inches - In Miles
In Laughter - In Strife
In - Five Hundred Twenty-Five Thousand Six Hundred Minutes
How Do You Measure a Year In The Life?
How About Love?

Larsen’s lyrics, while suggesting the continuum of life, carry angst for something more than tick-tock time. In the journey of kronos time is there, could there be something more significant, something of value, something legacy-driven that gives lasting impact to kronos time? The ancient Greeks would answer in the affirmative.

Opportune Time

Kairos (καιρος), even though the Greek meanings are complex and culturally dependent, refers to the right time, opportune time or seasonable time. It cannot be measured. It is the perfect time, the qualitative time, the perfect moment, the “now.” Kairos brings transcending value to kronos time. Eric Charles White, in Kaironomia: On the Will-to-Invent, defines kairos with this imagery:

Archery – an opening, or opportunity or, more precisely, a long tunnel-like aperture through which the archer’s arrow has to pass. Successful passage of a kairos requires, therefore, that the archer’s arrow be fired not only accurately but with enough power for it to penetrate.

Weaving – the critical time when the weaver must draw the yarn through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth being woven.

Kairos is the right moment of opportunity which requires proactivity to achieve success. It is significant and decisive. These moments transcend kronos, stirring emotions and realities to cause decisive action. It is not an understatement to say that kairos moments alter destiny. To miscalculate kronos is inconvenient. To miscalculate kairos is lamentable.

The Background of Kairos

Kairos was known in Greek mythology as the youngest child of the god Zeus.

Quite close to the entrance to the stadium [at Olympia] are two altars; one they call the altar of Hermes of the Games, the other the altar of Kairos (Opportunity). *Pausanias, Guide to Greece 5.14.9*

His bronze statue was known as the most beautiful of statues. Eye witnesses describe the statue as youthful, "beautiful to look upon as he waved his downy beard and left his hair unconfined for the south wind to toss wherever it would; and he had a blooming complexion, showing by its brilliancy the bloom of his body...he stood poised on the tips of his toes on a sphere, and his feet were winged." The statue was so magnetic people "stood speechless at the sight." The artist sought to capture the very essence of kairos:

The wings on his feet, he told us, suggested his swiftness, and that, borne by the seasons, he goes rolling on through all eternity; and as to his youthful beauty, that beauty is always opportune and that Kairos (Opportunity) is the only artificer of beauty, whereas that of which the beauty has withered has no part in the nature of Kairos (Opportunity); he also explained that the lock of hair on his forehead indicated that while he is easy to catch as he approaches, yet, when he has passed by, the moment of action has likewise expired, and that, if opportunity (kairos) is neglected, it cannot be recovered." *Callistratus, Descriptions 6*

The Ancient Greeks, the seedbed of existential thinkers, sought to understand kairos at multiple levels. They applied kairos thinking in arenas of legal, political, and epideictic (the artfully skilled and heightened rhetorical expression of praise). In legal rhetoric, kairos was related to justice beyond the written law, that is, law applied at specific times and circumstances unforeseen by legislators. Political rhetoric concerns the elements of usefulness, suitability, and honor. Kairos was also central to the Sophists, who saw kairos as the ability to understand the subtleties of a rhetorical situation. Kairos is seen as the orator's ability to adapt to and take advantage of the contingent circumstances.

One element of speech rhetoric is *The Audience*, the psychological and emotional makeup of the hearers. The other is *Decorum*, the principle of apt speech. Aristotle identifies kairos as intrinsically related to the time and space when proof must be delivered to the hearers. Therefore, speakers are to be aware of their words AND be able to choose opportune moments to re-awaken the hearers. That moment, recognized, chosen and acted upon, is kairotic or interchangeably, kairos. Kairos was not only dependent upon the appropriate timing and purpose, but also the appropriate nature of the situation, the approach, and the implications of what is being presented. [These concepts are explained in detail

in the book Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Praxis, Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin.] Modern day students of rhetoric are baffled by the word. S.H. Butcher who translated much of Aristotle noted that “kairos is a Greek word ‘with no single precise equivalent in any other language.’” (Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, 118). They believe that grasping the spirit of kairos IS their area of study because the spirit of kairos is essential to the practice of rhetoric.

Even though kairos is a bit illusive, it is at the same time, alluring. The Greeks knew kairos intersected kronos time. Yet, what was the impact of kairos? For whom was kairos available? Did kairos opportunities reside for only a few? In *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates writes that educated people are those “who manage well the circumstances which they encounter day by day, and who possess a judgment which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely misses the expedient course of action.”

It was into this setting where another philosopher of a different bent, named Paul, engaged in kairotic interchanges in Athens on the Areopagus (also known as Mars Hill). Can you picture a well-educated man, known and respected for his zealousness in seeking to destroy the followers of a new sect out of Jerusalem called “The Way” (also known as Christ-followers), and who had the ability to stand toe-to-toe with philosophers, now directing his tenacity toward offering another, more divine intersection of “opportunity?” Here’s one example:

[Paul] also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “This babbler has picked up some strange ideas.” Others said, “He’s pushing some foreign religion.” Then they took him to the Council of Philosophers. “Come and tell us more about this new religion,” they said. “You are saying some rather startling things, and we want to know what it’s all about.” (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.) Bible, Acts 17:18-21

Paul, the Apostle, proceeded to write half of the books of the New Testament and redefined the concept of kairos for his readers.

The Redefining of Kairos

The New Testament writers reflect the evolution of the word by referring to kairos time as the present moment, the defining moment; a time-frame for divine interaction and occurrences. The Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were capricious and dispensed good or ill arbitrarily. How would Paul bring clarity to kairos?

As clearly as John Keating passionately urged, “Carpe diem,” Paul traveled throughout the Asia Minor teaching, and more importantly, living out the message: εξαγοραζεσθαι τον καιρον literally, “buy up the opportunity.” The word “buy up” has its roots in the image of going to the marketplace and seeking to buy back, “to take it off the market”; to redeem. His admonition seems to be clear: people who live in

kronos time need to intersect with the Divine in order to grasp the full power of kairos. Go and buy back opportunities! Redeem them for good!

It is difficult to measure kairos time. It flows; allowing us to be in the moment. Erwin McManus, while never using the term kairos, speaks of a flow of time; movements which move in a timely manner and waits for no one. Describing or capturing a kairos moment is fluid and beyond expression. McManus suggests:

I think we need to spend a day with Monet. He had a clear sense of what was hidden in a moment. Most of us think of a movement as something that's stationary, stagnant, and unchanging. We want to capture the moment and stand in the moment. If there's a moment you want to preserve or remember you must take a snapshot. The genius of Monet is that he saw the moment for what it really was. It was as if he read the dictionary and realized that the essence of the words moment and motion are the same. Monet was a master of light and movement. His paintings were blurred and obscure and yet beautiful and full of insight. If we could someone see life through his eyes, we would begin to see life as it really is. (An Unstoppable Force)

Grasping the Depth of Kairos

One doesn't catch up with kairos time rather one participates in it. Kairos time can occur during activity or stillness. It simply intersects with kronos time. Newbery-Award winning author Madeleine L'Engle, best known for her children's books, writes of kronos and kairos. She suggests that kairos can sometimes enter, penetrate, and break through kronos: the child at play, the painter at an easel, the saint at prayer, friends around the dinner table, the mother reaching out for the newborn are in what she calls kairos.

Taking kairos a step further Jean Shinoda Bolen suggests, "When we participate in time and therefore lose our sense of time passing we are in kairos; here we are totally absorbed in the present moment, which may actually stretch out over hours." (Close to the Bone: Life Threatening Illness and the Search for Meaning, p 86)

T. S. Eliot (Four Quartets) ruminates in "The Dry Salvages" Number 3:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

Could it be that one could get so caught up in kairos that kronos is truly transcended? At those moments one is at soul-level.

The Kairos Call

The notion of kairos is characterized by what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who survived years of imprisonment and exile in the Gulag Archipelago, calls "knots," those decisive historic moments in which everything is rolled up and tied in a knot. In *The Interpretation of History*, Lutheran Theologian Paul Tillich made prominent use of the term, referring to kairos as those moments of crisis in history which create an opportunity for, and even demand, an existential decision. William Wilberforce forged the way for the abolition of slavery in England. George Washington accepted many kairos opportunities as general and president of a fledgling nation.

Abraham Lincoln, the once uneducated country-boy, delivered one of the shortest, yet memorable addresses in American History on the Gettysburg Battlefield. As a determined leader of a war-torn country he concluded with this kairos challenge:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Winston Churchill, on June 18, 1940, gave a fiery-impassioned speech to the House of Commons that historians believe turned the tide of the war by winning a victory for human freedom. Seemingly defeated on every front, Churchill knew that he was the one to make the clarion call:

Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour." (www.winstonchurchill.org)

The impeccable reality of kairos moments is that they are special, cosmic, and whether recognized or not, even divine. "The hour is the God-given moment of destiny not to be shrunk from but seized with decisiveness, the floodtide of opportunity and demand in which the unseen waters of the future surge

down to the present." (Os Guinness, Character Counts) Nothing is more critical than to recognize and respond to such a moment.

Kairos Possibilities and Potential

Throughout life, human beings are given multiple opportunities to seize high impact moments. These kairos moments are rich with potential and pregnant with possibilities. "Whatever we may become, wherever we go, whatever we do, we should always be aware of what once was, what might have been, and what could well be again." (Os Guinness, God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt)

Yet, with every opportunity comes a price tag. One cannot seize the day (or time) without choosing to not seize something else, which will undoubtedly have consequences. The itinerate Rabbi Jesus would speak frequently of *counting the costs*. People who choose to seize the moments are less concerned about the sacrifices they are making than they are about the significance of their decision. The encouragement is to make decisions wisely.

Think of the Old Testament story of Esther. Would she be open to seizing the day? Would she let her divine moment pass her by? She was a lone Jew in a Gentile king's harem at the precipice of watching the potential genocide of her race when she was given this challenge by fellow-countryman Mordecai: *If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. What's more, who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for just such a time as this? (Esther 4:14)* She stood face-to-face with her God-given moment of destiny: a kairos moment. James Emery White confidently exclaims, "Kairos moments are never pragmatic moves to ensure a blessed life during our short tenure on earth. They are moments to be seized for the sake of eternity and the Lord of eternity." (Life-Defining Moments: Daily Choices with the Power to Transform Your Life, p 97)

In J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (The Fellowship of the Ring), an elderly Bilbo Baggins offers to carry The Ring of Power into the Dark Lord Sauron's domain. His intention is to return it to the Land of Mordor, into the fires of Mount Doom from which it was forged. Yet he knew the temptation of the ring. So he said to himself, "Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself." His old friend Gandalf the wizard releases him from the task, "If you had really started this affair you might be expected to finish it. But you know well enough that starting is too great a claim for any, and that only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero."

The great starter of events, of course, is God Himself. And while the great deeds are not done by a few, but by many, the heroes are bound by their choice to take a stand. Through this decision they assume a role in the great contest between good and evil; between the movement of God and rebellion of the Evil One. Each succeeding generation carries on playing its part in the great cosmic battle that will eventually be brought to a finish at the end of history. The question is whether we

will choose to walk in the footsteps of the heroes who went before us. It's a daunting choice indeed. (James Emery White, Life-Defining Moments: Daily Choices with the Power to Transform Your Life, p 85)

Tolkien provides some clarity about kairos decisions throughout his epic. The hobbits, the elves, Gandalf, the Fellowship are all part of a metanarrative; a story that provides framework upon which other's experiences can be built. Each of us is afforded moments to take a stand, regardless of appearance (Frodo, the Hobbit) to position (Aragon, the king in waiting). Kairos moments can catapult a person into the very essence of life, which often comes with great consequences. Yet, it is there, in kairos moments, where we live the great drama of life. Maybe it is in those times when we feel most alive, most in touch with our eternal purpose. Make no doubt about it, these moments are not just discerned, they must be seized.

Bilbo's young nephew, Frodo, knew when the kairos moment was calling him. That's the way kairos moments often present themselves. Challenges, calls, "leaps of faith" into the great unknown! Though sometimes unexplainable, the call is unmistakable. Could there be a cosmic gong?

At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. "I will take the Ring," Frodo said, "though I do not know the way."

Elrond raised his eyes and looked at him, and Frodo felt his heart pierced by the sudden keenness of the glance. "If I understand aright all that I have heard," he said, "I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will. This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the great. Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it? Or, if they are wise, why should they expect to know it, until the hour has struck? But it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right."

Let's be very clear, the kairos call is sometimes very challenging. The responsibility of the Ring came upon Frodo unwanted, what seems to happen with kairos calls. Yet, the power lies in what we do with the kairos moment. Reflect on some interchanges between Frodo and Gandalf:

Frodo: I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

Gandalf: So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the Ring. In which case, you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.

Frodo: I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?

Gandalf: Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess. (He was just a simple hobbit, after all.) But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart, and wits as you have.

The weight of kairos opportunities can bring consternation. They call us out of our comfort zones. Oh to have wise people, like Gandalf, who listen to our doubts and then remind us of the importance of seizing kairos moments and staying the course! Kairos moments are well worth it.

The Challenge

Let's tweak John Keating's Latin urge to a kairos admonition: *Tempus Occasio!* Seize the kairos moment!

Every human being is eternally valued. Every human being exists for only a certain amount of kronos time. Thousands of years before The Byrds' popular, "Turn! (To Everything There is a Season), King Solomon wrote: *There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven. (Ecclesiastes)* The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, uses the word kairos to capture the writer's intent. The question is, "What will we do with our kronos moments?" There is something beyond kronos. There is a time that impacts kronos with such intensity that it can alter the very kronos of a person's life. Every human being is wired with gifts and passions which afford opportunities to make unique impacts. While each of us writes the script of our life, we have been given extraordinary potential to make a difference. *Tempus Occasio!*

James W. Moore boldly writes, "Kairos time is *full* time, *vital* time, *crucial* time, *decisive* time...those rich special moments that break into the humdrum and change your life; those powerful dramatic moments when things seem to fall into place; a new perspective comes, and God seems to be speaking loud and clear. That is kairos!" (Seizing the Moments: Making the Most of Life's Opportunities, p 16)

Kairos and the Present Moment

The young struggling diabetic Shelby, in the movie Steel Magnolias (1989) muses, "I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special." Kairos moments are waiting to be grasped.

There is no better time to apprehend kairos than the exact moment in time in which a person lives: the present moment. Simply put, the past is over; the future has yet to be written. We have the gift of the present moment in which to live. Will we seize the present moment or passively watch time tick by? The question is far from cavalier. It carries with it the tenderness of a care-giver blended with the challenge of a coach. The options are simple but the consequences can lead to great complexities. Either we proactively seize kairos time or we, by choice, choose only to live in kronos time, which tempts us to reshape the past or lures us to bring unwarranted assurances to our future. The later is a tenuous place to live. It leads to limited satisfaction, feeds our control issues, and breeds a lack of contentment.

Can you think of a moment in your life which brought great joy to you? Fulfilling a dream, falling in love, the birth of a child? If only that moment could be frozen in time. It cannot. That moment is in the past, a memory to which we add other memories which will form the legacy of our lives. That moment is

to be remembered and celebrated. It becomes another stitch in the fabric of our lives. It dare not become the entire garment. Recently three Detroit baseball players from an era long gone by were featured guests at a local expo. These once stellar athletes, now plump old men, limped down the stairs to their booth for signing autographs. There seemed to be two types of autograph seekers that day: those who wanted a symbol of some of the good 'ole years and those who were living as if the '84 Tigers just clinched the pennant. They donned jerseys and hats; taking the concept of "fan" to another level. There was a difference from remembering the past and choosing to live in the past.

Conversely, can you think of a moment in your life which brought pain or sadness? Was it a poor decision? Someone who hurt you? The loss of someone you love? If only that moment had not happened. It did. That moment is also in the past, and added to our memory. It too, becomes another stitch in the fabric of our lives. It dare not become the entire garment. How many people do you know who live in the past with such intensity that it drives their very decision-making? Rather than choosing to observe the past as a scar, they see it as a festering wound. Some even choose to regularly keep the wound open. That way they can actually use the wound as leverage for manipulation or exacting some revenge. Others peel back the scar when it is convenient giving them a good excuse for not taking responsibility for their decisions.

The old saying is true, "He who ignores history is bound to repeat it." However, there is a great distance between knowing our past and choosing to live in the past. Philosophy majors spar over this concept. Therapists earn a living helping people understand it. It is the crux of how human beings, young and old, choose to live. Will we choose the present moment?

This is very practical. Take for instance, Brady Quinn, quarterback (2002-2006), The University of Notre Dame:

Before coach Charlie Weiss came to Notre Dame, Brady Quinn's development was like a slow, steady drip. Quinn had arrived at Notre Dame as a highly touted quarterback ... However, he wasn't able to live up to the high expectations during his first two years in South Bend, IN.

With one season of eligibility remaining, Quinn holds almost every major Notre Dame single-season and career passing record. His improved play has much to do with the Irish's return to a place among the nation's elite programs. (Michael Rothstein, ESPN.com, January 2, 2006)

Charlie Weiss came to Notre Dame's storied program as suburb playing-calling genius with three Super Bowl rings. His pedigree is helping young quarterbacks succeed to monumental levels. In an interview, Quinn was asked to describe the zenith of his turnaround, he simply reflected, "It all began when I started to believe the coach." What was the coach's oft-repeated mantra to Quinn? Forget the past. I'll worry about your future. Your job is to live in the present moment.

What if a person would simply choose to live, just live, in the present moment? Imagine a life of present moment living where authentic behavior is honed by the self-discipline, practice, and self-control of the martial artist. Imagine what it would be like to make conscience efforts to let go of all our baggage –

childhood problems, prejudices, assumptions, interpretations, and projections – and being responsive to the moment, appreciating “the power of now.” Present moment living is both spontaneous and responsible. (Spiritually Intelligent Leadership, Danah Zohar, Leader to Leader, No. 38 Fall 2005)

Conclusion

In the span of every human being’s life there are kairos opportunities.

You may not be standing in the hallway of a boarding school with John Keating whispering, “Carpe Diem!” But you are standing on the precipice of other kairos opportunities. *Tempus occasio!*

You may not be a teenager who is seeking to understand the meaning of life. But you are invited to find purpose and power as you gaze into the face of the One who created you and calls you “Beloved,” offering you destiny-changing opportunities. *Tempus occasio!*

You may not be gazing into the pictures of those who lived a century ago. But you are invited to study the lives of those who have taken their kairos moments and transformed their world. *Tempus occasio!*

Are you ready for an adventure?

If you listen real close, you can hear opportunity calling. Your legacy is ready to be written.

Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it?

Tempus! Hear it?

Tempus! Tempus occasio! Seize kairos!

Make your lives extraordinary.

Mark R . Freier

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