

Seizing the Moment Assembly

To be successful, you need to have the right skills and the right work ethic. Talent and hard work are a winning combination. However, if you can have only one of the two, choose hard work: a hard working normal guy usually beats a lazy talent. But neither of these attributes are effective unless you can also seize the moment. Seizing the moment involves two things: knowing the right thing to do and knowing when to do it. That means that first we need to understand the people around us and their situation – this understanding gives us insight into the right thing to do. Secondly, out of all the moments available to us, we need the ability to select just one - the perfect moment to act.

These skills are best expressed in two words that may be new to you – the first is the French word *prevenance*. *Prevenance* is like anticipation, but is much more sophisticated. It means attentiveness to another's needs: being pre-emptively kind, based on an understanding of another person's hopes and desires. To do it successfully, you have to put yourself in another's shoes and know what they want, sometimes before they even know themselves. As you might guess, since the French have a word for it, it is the essence of courtliness and courtesy. It shows a generosity of soul, in that you have gone to the trouble of anticipating another's need, with the intention of helping them. Associated words to *prevenance* are *bienveillance* - kindness; *délicatesse* – tactfulness, delicacy, and *sollicitude* – gentle concern.

To demonstrate *prevenance*, you must first understand another person fully, then you must pick the perfect moment to meet their need. In doing so you will be the perfect host and companion.

The other word is Greek – *Kairos*. It describes a perfect, delicate, crucial moment. *Kairos* is that instant of time when everything aligns, to make it just right for action, words or movement. If you can recognise *kairos* when it appears, you know the key moment at which decisive action can be taken. Put *prevenance* and *kairos* together and you have the perfect approach to life – a sort of poised readiness.

Kairos is an interesting and ancient word that has been applied in a number of different settings. The ancient Greeks had two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* refers to chronological time – the thing that your watch measures. *Kairos* is what you *do* with that time. In its origin, it goes back to the skills of archery and weaving cloth. In archery, *kairos* denoted the perfect moment for an arrow to be loosed. In weaving, *kairos* describes the moment when the shuttle can be passed through threads on the loom. *Kairos* is also an alternate spelling of the Greek god Caerus. He was the god of luck and opportunity; appropriately he had a statue by the entrance to the stadium at Olympia, for *kairos* is the essence of winning in sport as well. No one can win a game if they cannot recognise the right moment to strike, the tipping point that can shift the balance of play in the game.

Kairos was important to the Greeks in a number of ways. It matters in rhetoric, as to win an argument or debate the first thing you need is the ability to adapt to and take advantage of changing circumstances.

Isocrates, an ancient Greek sophist, wrote that the definition of educated people was that they “manage well the circumstances which they encounter day by day, whose judgment is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and who rarely miss the right course of action”.

In rhetoric, *kairos* is the instant when an opening appears in the other’s argument, or when the mood of the room can be seized. For it to work, what is said must suit both audience and occasion. Secondly, it has something of the holy fire, which will shift the understanding of the listeners and convince them. As ever, *kairos* is about delivering the perfect words at exactly the right moment. I hope you have experienced the joy of it in a debate; I hope you have avoided the opposite, when nothing one says or does goes right and everything falls short of the target.

Kairos is also important in Christian theology. In the Bible, *kairos* means ‘the appointed time in the purpose of God’ - the time when God acts. The word is used 86 times in the New Testament to refer to an opportune time or a moment. You might define it as the intersection of the here and now with Eternity.

In science, *kairos* also makes an early appearance. Hippocrates is known as the father of medicine. Doctors today must take the Hippocratic Oath before they can practice medicine. Hippocrates famously said that “every *kairos* is a *chronos*, but not every *chronos* is a *kairos*.” In other words, *kairos* can only take place at a moment in time, but not every moment in time is the perfect moment to act. Hippocrates also saw *kairos* in the experiments he undertook. When you do your next practical in Science, perhaps you too will understand the importance of finding the perfect moment – the *kairos* when you must act. This remains true in modern medicine, when treating sickness or injury – Emergency doctors speak of ‘the golden hour’, when action must be taken in offering treatment.

Others have written of this feeling, when you experience the sudden certainty that this is the moment to act, and what exactly to do. As I said earlier, sportsmen know the moment of *kairos*, and it can turn a game on its head. An inspirational song was played to the England rugby team just before they went out to win the 2003 World Cup final. The words of that song were by someone who knew *kairos* well - the lyrics asked the England team:

Look
 If you had
 One shot
 Or one opportunity
 To seize everything you ever wanted
 In one moment
 Would you capture it
 Or just let it slip?

You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
 You own it, you better never let it go
 You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
 This opportunity comes once in a lifetime...’

Who would have thought that Eminem in his song ‘Lose Yourself’ would capture the essence of the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*?

Link *kairos* to *prevenance* and you have the perfect mix. You are ahead of the game, anticipating and pre-empting your audience's needs. You are showing care and deep understanding; you are equipped to seize any moment and turn it all to your advantage.

In any sphere of your life, it amounts to a kind of super-power, and it is one that will stand you in good stead for success in life. *Prevenance* and *kairos* – words to live by.
