

LEARNING CORNER

PROF. NWARU'S CAREER NAVIGATOR

Series 1: The Art of Career Time and Timing

The costs of missed *kairos*: lessons from opportunities ignored or delayed

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ABSTRACT

The last two papers of the series established the fact that *kairos* moments are appreciated through the lens of action and reward. The current paper, the fifth in the series, turns attention to the shadow side of career *kairos*: the costs incurred when *kairos* is missed, delayed, or resisted. As usual, drawing from my own career journeys, the paper argues that missed *kairos* is not simply the absence of progress but the presence of delay, hesitation, and misalignment. Unlike overt failure, missed *kairos* is rarely dramatic. Its effects accumulate quietly over time, reshaping career trajectories, identities, and capacities for future action. The paper distinguishes between fully missed *kairos*, near-missed *kairos*, and *kairos* eroded through delay. It identifies common mechanisms underlying these dimensions, including fear of failure or judgment, excessive rationalization, misplaced loyalty, and the seduction of comfort and stability. While the material costs of missed *kairos*—such as lost funding, delayed advancement, or foregone collaborations—are significant, the paper emphasizes the deeper immaterial consequences, including erosion of self-trust, diminished agency, weakened discernment, and the persistence of regret. Repeated inaction, the paper contends, gradually silences the “inner witness” that signals alignment, making subsequent *kairos* harder to recognize and seize. Through personal reflections on near-missed moments, the paper demonstrates the fragility of *kairos* and the disproportionate impact of timing. Even when action eventually follows, delay itself carries psychological and relational costs that can drain momentum and increase the price of change. Observations of colleagues’ trajectories further illustrate how missed *kairos* can ripple beyond individuals, constraining collective innovation and leadership within academic communities. Positioning missed *kairos* not purely as moral failure but as a human vulnerability embedded in career structures, this paper contributes a cautionary complement to accounts of *kairos* as opportunity. It concludes that vigilance against regret requires cultivating discernment, redefining loyalty, and recognizing that timely courage is a form of stewardship. Understanding what is lost when *kairos* is missed sharpens responsiveness to future moments that may not return in the same form.

KEYWORDS:

Agency, Career trajectories, Discernment, Inner witness, Kairos, Regret, Self-trust, Timing, Vulnerability, Workplace loyalty

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“Hell begins the day God grants you the vision to see all you could have done, should have done, and would have done, but did not do.”

— *Johann von Goethe*

INTRODUCTION: THE SHADOW SIDE OF KAIROS

Every *kairos* moment carries within it both promise and peril. When recognized and seized, *kairos* becomes transformative, opening paths that reshape careers, identities, and futures—a theme explored in the preceding paper. Yet *kairos* also has a shadow side. When *kairos* is missed, ignored, postponed, or resisted, it does not simply fade away. Instead, it leaves traces: in stalled trajectories, in diminished confidence, and in quiet but persistent regret. The costs of missed *kairos*, like *kairos* itself, are rarely dramatic or immediate; they are cumulative, unfolding slowly through years of “almosts,” “if onlys,” and “perhaps later.”

Missed *kairos* is not merely the absence of progress; it is the presence of delay. It is the decision to remain longer than necessary in environments that no longer stretch our capacities. It is the choice of comfort over growth, certainty over possibility. Often justified as prudence, loyalty, or patience, such delays may appear reasonable at the time. Yet in hindsight, they reveal themselves as moments when alignment existed—between readiness and opportunity—but courage did not follow recognition.

The costs of missed *kairos* are both material and immaterial. Materially, they may involve lost funding, delayed promotions, diminished research outputs, or slower professional advancement. Opportunities in academia and professional life are often narrow and time-bound; they arise under specific conditions and may not reappear in the same form they previously did. When a *kairos* window closes, the loss is not always replaceable by another opening elsewhere. The trajectory changes subtly but decisively. A missed application, an unpursued move, or an unclaimed role

can set off a chain of secondary consequences that compound over time.

Yet the immaterial costs of missed *kairos* are often deeper and more enduring. Missed *kairos* can erode self-trust—the confidence in one’s ability to discern and act when it matters most. Each ignored inner witness weakens the next, making future recognition harder and action more hesitant. Over time, individuals may begin to outsource their judgment entirely to external validation: supervisors, committees, norms, or timing deemed “appropriate” by others. What is lost, then, is not only opportunity but agency.

There is also an emotional cost. Missed *kairos* often leaves behind a residue of quiet regret—not loud or paralyzing, but persistent. It surfaces unexpectedly, when one encounters peers who moved on, when reading a job announcement that feels uncannily familiar, or when reflecting on paths not taken. This regret is not simply about ambition; it is about unrealized potential and unexpressed capacity. It is the grief of knowing that one did not fully inhabit a moment that seemed, however briefly, meant for them. Importantly, missed *kairos* is rarely the result of ignorance alone. More often, it stems from fear: fear of failure, fear of disappointing mentors, fear of appearing disloyal, premature, or overambitious. It may also arise from excessive rationalization—waiting for more publications, more experience, more certainty—long after readiness has already arrived. In such cases, the opportunity does not disappear because one was unqualified, but because one hesitated.

This **fifth paper** is a contrast to the fourth paper: while the fourth paper uncovered the rewards¹ that follow a recognized² and seized³ career *kairos*, the current paper examines the **costs of missed *kairos***, not as a moral failure, but as a human vulnerability embedded in academic and professional life. By reflecting on moments where *kairos* demanded action—and on what might have been lost had courage not followed conviction—the paper seeks to illuminate what is at stake when timing is misread or ignored. Understanding the shadow side of *kairos* is essential, not to cultivate

fear of missing out, but to sharpen discernment, strengthen courage, and reclaim responsibility for one's own trajectory. For *kairos*, once missed, does not always return—and when it does not, it leaves lessons written in absence.

THE NATURE OF MISSED KAIROS

Missed *kairos* rarely announces itself with noise or finality. More often, it slips by quietly, disguised as reasonableness, patience, or prudence. It does not

always feel like a mistake in the moment; instead, it often presents itself as a choice to wait, to prepare a little longer, or to remain where one already is. This is precisely what makes missed *kairos* challenging to recognize. Unlike failure, which is visible and often instructive, missed *kairos* rarely leaves any immediate trace. Life continues, routines remain intact, and outward markers of progress may even persist. Yet something essential has shifted beneath the surface. Figure 1 shows the core causes of missed *kairos*.



Figure 1. Different causes of missing *kairos*

One common form of missed *kairos* is indecision or procrastination. Opportunities, particularly in academic and professional contexts, are frequently time-bound. Funding calls close, positions are filled, and collaborations move forward without pause. When hesitation lingers too long—when a decision is deferred in the hope of greater certainty—the moment may pass irrevocably. This form of delay is often justified as strategic patience, especially in environments that reward caution and incremental progression. However, there is a critical difference between thoughtful timing

and paralyzing delay or procrastination. Missed *kairos* emerges when discernment has already occurred, but action fails to follow.

Fear is another powerful cause to missed *kairos*. The call to act often arrives alongside uncertainty and vulnerability: the possibility of rejection, failure, or social discomfort. Fear may take the form of self-doubt—questioning one's readiness, legitimacy, or worthiness—or concern about how others will perceive the decision. In academic life, this fear is often

intensified by hierarchical relationships. The prospect of disappointing a supervisor, appearing disloyal, or leaving a supportive environment prematurely can silence even a strong inner conviction. In such cases, comfort becomes a refuge, and courage is postponed. The result is not immediate loss, but gradual stagnation.

Missed *kairos* can also masquerade as loyalty. Staying longer than necessary in an environment that once nurtured growth but no longer does can feel morally commendable. Loyalty to mentors, institutions, or ongoing projects is often praised, and in many cases rightly so. Yet loyalty becomes costly when it overrides the call of *kairos* and discernment—when it binds individuals to contexts that limit their expansion, creativity, or evolving purpose. What begins as gratitude can quietly turn into inertia. The cost here is subtle but profound: growth is delayed not because opportunity is absent, but because it is declined in favour of familiarity.

The most subtle aspect of missed *kairos* is that its costs are not immediately visible. Externally, nothing appears wrong. One may remain productive, respected, and secure. Careers do not collapse; lives do not unravel. This outward continuity can create the illusion that nothing important was lost. Yet internally, the effects accumulate. There is often a quiet awareness that something did not align—that a moment of convergence between readiness and opportunity went unanswered. Over time, this awareness can manifest as diminished self-trust. Each ignored inner witness makes the next one easier to dismiss.

The deeper cost of missed *kairos*, therefore, is not merely delayed advancement or lost opportunity, but a weakening of conviction. When individuals repeatedly override their own discernment, they may begin to rely excessively on external validation—waiting for permission, consensus, or perfect conditions that rarely arrive. This erosion of agency affects future decision-making, making it harder to act decisively even when alignment is clear. What is lost is not only a moment, but momentum.

There is also an existential dimension to missed *kairos*. Such moments are often experienced in retrospect,

through comparison and reflection. One sees what might have been possible—not in abstract terms, but concretely, through paths taken by others or opportunities that later reveal their significance. This recognition can give rise to a muted but persistent regret, not rooted in envy or failure, but in unrealised potential. It is the recognition that one did not fully step into a moment that seemed uniquely one's own.

Understanding the nature of missed *kairos* requires moving beyond simplistic notions of success and failure. Missed *kairos* is about misalignment rather than incompetence, about hesitation rather than incapacity. By attending to how missed *kairos* manifests—through indecision, fear, and misplaced loyalty—we become better equipped to recognise its subtle costs and to respond differently when the next moment of *kairos* arrives.

NEAR-MISSED KAIROS

Not all *kairos* moments are cleanly seized or clearly missed. Some hover riskily close to loss—rescued only by a last decision, a sudden clarity, or a refusal to yield to discouragement. These near-missed *kairos* moments are especially instructive because they authenticate the very nature of *kairos* moments – they are fragile. They expose how easily alignment between readiness and opportunity can dissolve under the weight of hesitation, fear, or well-intended external caution.

Looking back at my PhD funding application, I recognize how narrowly that moment escaped becoming a missed *kairos*. By all conventional academic standards, I was not the “typical” candidate. I was only nine months into my doctoral training, without publications and still immersed in preparatory work for my project. My supervisor's response was reasonable, even generous—encouraging me to apply, but framing it as a learning exercise rather than a genuine opportunity. Had I relied solely on her assessment, I would likely have deferred the application to a future year, waiting until I appeared more competitive on paper.

That decision—to wait—would have seemed sensible and responsible. Yet it would have been costly. The

funding call was time-bound; the moment was narrow. Had I delayed, the opportunity would not have waited for my readiness to “mature.” Someone else would have received the award, and my doctoral years would have unfolded very differently. I would likely have spent significant time juggling part-time work, dividing attention between survival and scholarship, and progressing more slowly through my research. The material costs would have been measurable: fewer uninterrupted research hours, delayed outputs, and diminished focus. More consequential, however, would have been the immaterial costs. Securing that funding did more than provide financial stability; it reshaped my sense of self as a researcher. It affirmed my capacity to discern opportunity, to trust my inner witness, and to act decisively despite external doubt. Had I missed that *kairos* moment, I would not only have lost funding—I would have lost a formative moment of confidence. The researcher I became was shaped as much by that decision as by the research itself.

This experience taught me that *kairos* often hides behind discouragement. External voices, even well-meaning ones, tend to speak the language of averages, precedents, and probabilities. They assess readiness based on what has been done before, not on what is emerging, not on what is a possibility but hidden beyond conventional knowledge and experience. *Kairos*, by contrast, speaks in the language of alignment and possibility. It is deeply personal and often runs ahead of visible credentials. It reveals a sacred moment when you are drawn from the crowd, not by merit alone, but because the moment belongs to you. However, when external caution is elevated above the quiet authority of the inner witness, *kairos* can be slowly, almost subtly, suffocated—missed not through any defiance, but through hesitation, overthinking, and the soft erosion of trust in one’s own knowing.

I see the same pattern echoed in other moments of my career. Moving abroad for my first postdoctoral position could easily have been postponed in the name of security or loyalty. Returning home through a competitive fellowship could have been abandoned out of fear of how my supervisor might interpret my departure. Even responding to the initial email announcing a future tenured position could have been dismissed as premature or overly optimistic. In each

case, the moment was fragile. The difference between action and inaction was often measured in days—or even hours.

Near-missed *kairos* moments reveal that missing *kairos* is rarely about outright refusal. More often, it is about yielding to delay, self-doubt, or misplaced humility. They show how easily *kairos* can be reframed as “not yet,” “not ready,” or “not appropriate,” until the moment quietly closes. What saves near-missed *kairos* from becoming fully missed is not certainty, but courage—the willingness to act without full reassurance. Reflecting on near-missed *kairos* sharpens discernment. It reveals that *kairos* is not forceful; it does not tolerate prolonged negotiation. It demands attentiveness and responsiveness. These moments teach that when inner conviction is strong and alignment is clear, hesitation itself carries costs. Near-missed *kairos* thus becomes a teacher, reminding us that opportunity often stands at the threshold of discouragement, and that listening only to caution—without courage—is one of the fastest ways to let destiny pass by unnoticed.

THE WEIGHT OF DELAY IN *KAIROS*

Kairos is not only missed through refusal; it is also eroded through delay. In academic careers, where timing quietly governs access to funding, networks, and intellectual growth, hesitation carries its own weight. Even when action eventually follows, the period of postponement and procrastination can exact costs that are rarely acknowledged but deeply felt. Delay drains energy, clouds discernment, and prolongs internal conflict, often shrinking the very window that made the moment possible in the first place.

After completing my PhD, I felt a clear and persistent inner witness urging me to move on. The sense was not vague restlessness but a growing conviction that my next stage of development lay elsewhere. Yet alongside this clarity came competing forces. I had a supportive supervisor who valued my work and wanted me to stay. There were plans on the table, familiar routines, and the security of an environment where my competence was already recognized. Leaving meant stepping into uncertainty—new expectations, new cultures, start of a new journey of experiences and skills, and the risk of

failure. Loyalty and fear combined to slow my response. During this period, I wrestled with questions that many academics recognize: *What if I disappoint those who invested in me? What if I leave too soon? What if I am not as capable outside this familiar setting?* These doubts did not negate the inner witness, but they muted it. I did not immediately act on the *kairos*; instead, I lingered in indecision. Externally, nothing appeared wrong. I remained productive and engaged. Internally, however, the delay was costly. The weight of delay manifested first as prolonged uncertainty. Rather than focusing fully on the present or committing wholeheartedly to the future, I existed in a liminal state—half-staying, half-leaving. This divided attention diluted energy that could have been invested more productively. The mind, instead of being absorbed in research or growth, returned repeatedly to the unresolved decision. Delay, in this sense, did not preserve stability; it quietly undermined it.

Had I ignored the *kairos* entirely and chosen to stay, the costs would have been profound. I could have missed the opportunity to work with leading experts in my field, access advanced tools, and immerse myself in new methodologies that later became central to my research profile. My intellectual world could have remained narrower, bounded by the scope of a single lab or research environment and its established approaches. Such limitations are not always immediately visible, but they shape the long-term arc of a career, influencing what questions one dares to ask and what horizons one can imagine. Yet even though I ultimately acted and moved on, the delay itself exacted a price. Opportunities in academia are relational and temporal; they depend not only on ability but on availability and momentum. A prolonged hesitation can cool enthusiasm on both sides, weaken initial alignment, or make alternatives appear more attractive to institutions and collaborators. *Kairos* does not always wait patiently for internal conflicts to resolve.

This pattern reappeared later in my career. When contemplating leaving a prestigious postdoctoral position to pursue a fellowship that would reunite my family, hesitation again emerged—this time amplified by concern for reputation and perceived loyalty. The longer the decision lingered, the heavier the emotional toll became. Delay intensified fear rather than easing it,

turning discernment into exhaustion. What eventually restored clarity was not more analysis, but the courage to act.

The weight of delay reveals an important truth about *kairos*: timing is not neutral. Even short delays can weaken conviction, drain emotional resources, and increase the psychological costs of action. In some cases, delay transforms a moment of alignment into a moment of loss. In others, it allows action to occur—but at a higher personal price. Recognizing the weight of delay reframes how we understand missed *kairos*. The issue is not only whether we act or do not act, but **when**. Courage delayed is not cost-free. In academic careers especially, where momentum matters and opportunities are perishable, learning to respond promptly to *kairos* is not recklessness—it is stewardship of one's time, energy, and potential.

THE TEMPTATION TO SETTLE

Kairos moments often arrive not as clear directives but as invitations that unsettle comfort and challenge loyalty. One of the most vivid examples in my career came while I was abroad in a competitive postdoctoral position. On the surface, everything seemed ideal: an intellectually stimulating environment, access to world-class tools and collaborators, and a trajectory that promised growth and recognition. Yet beneath this surface, I felt a persistent tension. My inner witness whispered that my next *kairos* lay elsewhere, yet fear, loyalty, and uncertainty almost held me back.

When a prestigious fellowship was announced at my previous institution—a position that would allow me to reunite with my family—I initially hesitated. I worried about the perception of my then boss. Would he feel betrayed if I left so soon? Would my reputation be affected by what might appear as impatience or disloyalty? I questioned whether the timing was too early, whether I was overreaching, whether I should wait for “something safer” to appear. For weeks, I carried this indecision, weighing obligations against opportunity, comfort against alignment, and loyalty against destiny. The *kairos* moment hovered on the edge, fragile and fleeting, while my fear and doubt threatened to silence the inner witness entirely.

Table 1. Comparison of different dimensions of seized vs. delayed vs. missed *kairos* and their implications for a typical academic career

Dimension	Seized <i>Kairos</i>	Delayed <i>Kairos</i>	Missed <i>Kairos</i>
Response to inner witness	Inner conviction is recognized and acted upon promptly	Inner conviction is recognized but action is postponed	Inner conviction is ignored, rationalized away, or silenced
Timing of action	Timely and responsive; action aligns closely with opportunity window	Action follows after hesitation; timing is strained	No action within the opportunity window
Role of fear	Fear is present but does not govern the decision	Fear prolongs decision-making and increases emotional cost	Fear dominates, resulting in inaction
External voices (supervisors, norms)	External caution is weighed but not allowed to override discernment	External expectations and loyalty slow commitment	External norms fully override personal discernment
Energy and momentum	High energy; momentum accelerates growth	Energy is drained during delay; momentum must be rebuilt	Momentum stalls or slowly declines
Psychological state	Clarity, focus, and forward orientation	Prolonged inner conflict; subtlety	Lingering regret, self-doubt, and hindsight awareness
Impact on career identity	Strengthens self-trust and agency	Weakens confidence temporarily; agency is strained	Erodes self-trust; increases dependence on external validation
Career trajectory effect	Opens new pathways; expands scope and networks	Pathways open, but later and at higher personal costs	Trajectory narrows; future options are constrained
Visibility of costs	Costs are minimal and often invisible	Costs are hidden but felt internally	Costs become visible mainly in retrospect
Long-term outcomes	Growth, alignment, and compounding opportunity	Growth achieved, but with emotional and strategic loss	Unrealized potential; persistent “what if”
Relationship to opportunity	Opportunity is claimed as uniquely one’s own	Opportunity is partially salvaged	Opportunity passes to others
Learning effect	Builds <i>kairos</i> literacy and courage for future moments	Sharpens discernment through struggle	Teaches through regret, if reflected upon

Had I ignored this *kairos*, the costs would have been profound and multifaceted (**Figure 2 and Table 2**). Professionally, I could have missed a fellowship that not only advanced my academic profile but also positioned me to lead, innovate, and expand the scope of my research. The experience provided exposure to new collaborations, methodologies, and intellectual networks that accelerated my trajectory in ways that remaining in comfort never could. Personally, the delay or inaction could have prolonged separation from my

family, extending the emotional strain on both them and myself. The gap between professional success and personal fulfillment could have widened, creating a subtle but persistent dissonance. Emotionally, the costs could have been yet deeper. I could have lived with regret, knowing that I had ignored the clear call of alignment and acted out of hesitation rather than conviction. The inner witness could have been denied its power to shape action, leaving me with the haunting question: *What if I had trusted it?*



Figure 2. Different dimensions of costs associated with missed *kairos*

This near-miss underscored an essential truth about *kairos*: it is easily obscured by the attraction of settling. Staying put, remaining loyal, or adhering to conventional expectations often feels safe, yet safety can disguise cost. In academic careers, the temptation to settle is amplified by hierarchical pressures, mentorship obligations, and institutional rhythms that encourage predictability and patience. The discipline itself teaches respect for caution, incremental progress, and measured timing—virtues that, paradoxically, can sometimes silence the very intuition that signals an extraordinary opportunity. I realized that temporary loyalty, comfort, or fear of judgment is no substitute for discernment and courage; it can easily masquerade as prudence while quietly closing the door on alignment with destiny.

What ultimately resolved this moment was courage—the willingness to act despite uncertainty, despite potential disapproval of others, and despite the risks inherent in change. Listening to the inner witness and translating that conviction into decisive action, transformed what could have been a regretful

hesitation into a milestone of growth. The fellowship not only reunited me with my family but also positioned me on a trajectory that opened future opportunities, including eventual leadership and tenured positions. The lesson was clear: in academia, the cost of settling is rarely neutral. What feels safe in the short term can exact long-term professional, personal, and emotional tolls, while timely action—even when uncomfortable—can align opportunity with readiness and purpose.

This experience reminds me that *kairos* often arrives disguised as discomfort, that hesitation can be costly, and that settling in the name of loyalty or fear can be an invitation to regret. Recognizing the subtle yet heavy price of inaction is as important as celebrating the rewards of timely action. In the delicate calculus of academic life, courage is the measure that determines whether *kairos* becomes a moment seized or a potential forever lost. The **temptation to settle** can affect academics across multiple dimensions: it can constrain professional growth, intensify personal and emotional strain, and can undermine the capacity to act decisively in future *kairos* moments.

Table 2. Costs of delayed or missed *kairos* in academic careers

Type of <i>kairos</i>	Professional costs	Personal costs	Emotional/psychological costs	Subtle/hidden costs
Near-missed <i>kairos</i>	- Opportunity could have been lost (e.g., early PhD funding)- Slower career progression if hesitation continued- Reduced exposure to formative experiences	- Minimal, but small missed personal opportunities if action delayed	- Temporary doubt and anxiety- Minor erosion of confidence	- Risk of mistaking caution for prudence- Energy divided between indecision and ongoing work
Delayed <i>kairos</i>	- Momentum weakened; energy and focus diluted- Timing for optimal collaboration or recognition may be partially lost- Some growth still occurs, but at higher cost	- Prolonged separation from family or personal commitments (if relocation involved)- Opportunity to integrate work–life priorities delayed	- Prolonged inner conflict and stress- Anxiety intensifies with time- Partial weakening of self-trust	- Delay disguises risk as prudence- May reduce alignment with optimal opportunity window- Complicates relationships and perception of loyalty
Temptation to settle / missed <i>kairos</i>	- Forgone fellowships, positions, or funding- Narrowed research scope- Lost long-term trajectory and compounding opportunities	- Extended family or social strain- Inability to align personal and professional priorities	- Lingering regret and “what if” reflections- Erosion of confidence and self-trust- Emotional dissonance between ambition and inaction	- Safety or loyalty mistaken for virtue- Reduced readiness for future <i>kairos</i> moments- Missed alignment with personal and professional purpose

THE HAUNTING OF “WHAT IF”:

While *kairos* is deeply personal, its costs are visible not only in our own lives but in the lives of those around us. Over the years, I have watched colleagues navigate moments of potential career transformation with hesitation, fear, or misplaced loyalty—and I have observed the long shadows these choices can cast. Some seem to remain in environments or institutions far beyond the season that could have challenged or expanded them, content in stability while peers moved forward. Others let opportunities pass that aligned perfectly with their skills, even in their own realization, frozen by the fear of inadequacy or failure. Over time, the costs became clear: stagnated career trajectories, missed collaborations, and, most sadly, diminished self-trust. The regrets that emanate from these scenarios, sometimes boldly written on their faces, can be palpable, as if one can hear them ask the lingering and haunting “what if” question. This is a pattern I have observed several times: missing *kairos* leaves more than career gaps; it erodes the inner compass that signals the right time to act.

Watching these near-misses and losses in others sharpened my own awareness of *kairos*. For instance, by acting decisively on my first PhD funding application, which I could have lost if I had hesitated, surged my confidence and agency that comes from that decision. I thought of the fellowship I almost ignored while abroad, the months I wrestled with loyalty, fear, and uncertainty. The stakes felt both personal and ethical: staying put might seem safe, but the price was invisible until years later, manifesting in what might have been—a pattern of delayed growth and muted potential.

The haunting of “what if” extends beyond the individual. Repeated missed *kairos* can ripple through academic communities. When skilled colleagues hesitate or settle, teams may lose leadership, labs lose innovation, and networks lose collaborators who could have contributed to significant discoveries. The cost is both human and intellectual: stagnated careers paired with unrealized contributions. On a subtler level, the repeated failure to act can diminish trust in oneself. The inner witness—the quiet intuition that signals

alignment—grows faint. Those who have experienced missed opportunities may often struggle to recognize subsequent moments of *kairos* or, if they do, may hesitate at the first sign of uncertainty. The very faculty that could have guided them toward growth is weakened by their previous inaction.

Ultimately, *kairos* does not only carry the reward of action but also the warning of neglect. The weight of “what if” is heavy precisely because it is compounded over time. Each hesitation, each opportunity ignored, builds a history of self-doubt, reducing the courage to act when future *kairos* arise. The cost of missed opportunity is not only purely external. It is also internal: diminished confidence, weakened conviction, and clouding of the ability to discern the next right moment. These costs can shape entire careers because they are not hypothetical; they are real and cumulative. *Kairos*

therefore demands attention, discernment, and courage; when it is ignored or delayed repeatedly, the haunting of “what if” becomes both a mirror and a warning—of opportunities lost, potential unrealized, and the slow erosion of self-trust that makes future *kairos* all the harder to seize.

LESSONS FROM MISSED OR NEAR-MISSED KAIROS

Reflecting on my journey, I realize that *kairos*, within its fragility, is instructive. The moments I almost missed—or nearly deferred—taught me lessons that go far beyond the immediate gains or losses of funding, positions, or fellowships. These lessons are subtle, often internal, and they shape not only career trajectories but also the development of courage and self-trust (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Lessons from missed or near-missed *kairos*

Discouragement Can Blind You

When applying for the PhD funding early in my doctoral studies, my supervisor's words were cautious. Had I listened solely to that external advice, I might have been persuaded that I was not. Yet, I followed the persistent inner witness I had, and acting on that conviction transformed what could have been a mere trial into a defining moment in my doctoral journey. The lesson is clear: external voices, even well-intentioned ones, can unintentionally mute the inner sense of timing and alignment that *kairos* requires. Discernment involves balancing counsel with a deep awareness of one's own readiness and intuition.

Delay Weakens Energy

During consideration of my first postdoctoral position abroad, my supervisor wanted me to stay. Loyalty and fear tempted me to postpone the decision and remain in a familiar and safe environment. Each day of hesitation drained mental energy and prolonged inner conflict. Even though I eventually acted, the delay did not come without stress and uncertainty that could have been avoided. In academia, *kairos* often provides an initial surge of momentum—the clarity and conviction that propel research, applications, and collaborations. Hesitation consumes that energy and acting late can sometimes mean acting really too late. The lesson is that timeliness itself is a form of competence: recognizing *kairos* is only half the battle; acting decisively is the other.

Comfort Can Trap You

Comfort has its allure. My postdoc abroad was highly prestigious, stimulating, and secure. Yet beneath that comfort, the separation from my family carried a persistent ache. The fellowship at my previous institution offered alignment not only with my research but also with my personal needs. Remaining in comfort might have seemed safe, but it would have come at the cost of personal fulfillment and long-term growth. Comfort, even when prestigious, can become a trap; the longer we stay, the harder it becomes to leave. This lesson underscores that *kairos* often appears in tension—between security and growth, familiarity and destiny.

Loyalty Must Be Redefined

Loyalty is a noble virtue the world over and cannot be overemphasized, but it can easily be misapplied. When I hesitated to pursue the fellowship, I worried about what my boss would think—whether leaving soon would be a betrayal. Yet true loyalty does not demand sacrificing one's growth. It honors the long-term trajectory of both those we serve and ourselves. Staying in a position out of misplaced loyalty is self-betrayal; acting courageously in alignment with *kairos* honors both mentor and mentee by preserving integrity, trust, and authenticity. This must be the template.

Regret Is a Silent Burden

Finally, the deepest cost of missed or near-missed *kairos* is regret. Observing colleagues who hesitated or settled, I witnessed how unacted-upon opportunities linger in memory, gnawing quietly at confidence and self-trust. Unlike failure, which teaches through feedback, regret persists almost without redemption. It shapes not only future decision-making but also one's relationship to opportunity itself, dampening the inner witness and making it harder to recognize subsequent *kairos*. The haunting question of “*what if?*” reminds us that inaction is not neutral; it is cumulative, subtle, and deeply decisive.

Through these experiences—both my own and those I have observed—the lessons of *kairos* are clear: courage, discernment, and timely action are as important as skill or opportunity. Missed or near-missed moments are not merely lost opportunities; they are mirrors, revealing the subtle forces—fear, comfort, loyalty, and doubt—that can cloud judgment. Reflecting on them strengthens awareness and equips us to seize future *kairos* with clarity, confidence, and integrity.

CONCLUSION: VIGILANCE AGAINST REGRET

Missed *kairos* moments are costly in ways that extend far beyond the immediate absence of opportunity. They shape careers, yes, but they also leave subtle, enduring marks on confidence, peace of mind, and the willingness to act. Yet, paradoxically, they are also among the most incisive teachers. Each near-miss, each hesitation, and each moment of doubt carries a

lesson about timing, courage, and discernment—a lesson that, when reflected upon, strengthens vigilance for the future. In the end, the cost of missed *kairos* is always real and lasting: regret, diminished confidence, and the faint erosion of self-trust. When *kairos* is repeatedly ignored, the inner witness itself becomes muted, and the ability to discern future opportunities dims. Yet its antidote is equally real: vigilance, preparedness, and the courage to act when the inner witness calls. The stories of my PhD funding, postdoctoral moves, and fellowship decisions have shown me that acting on *kairos* requires both discernment and decisiveness, and that each action compounds, shaping both opportunity and identity. By honoring past near-misses and missed moments through reflection and learning, I equip myself to seize the next *kairos*. Regret may haunt us, but readiness protects us; it ensures that the next door, however narrow or subtle, is met with conviction rather than hesitation. *Kairos*, I have learned, is never guaranteed—but the choice to act, to be prepared, and to trust one’s inner witness is always ours. Vigilance against regret is not a passive reflection; it is an active commitment to recognize, embrace, and live fully within the fleeting, transformative moments that define both a career and a life.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared

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