

LEARNING CORNER

PROF. NWARU'S CAREER NAVIGATOR

Series 1: The Art of Career Time and Timing

The conditions of *kairos*: contexts that shape career-defining moments

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ABSTRACT

Papers 1-5 of this series have situated *kairos* as an important phenomenon in a professional career, which must be recognized and seized, from which various rewards abound, as well as costs for missed or ignored *kairos*. This sixth paper discusses the conditions and contexts that enable the fertilization of *kairos*. It argues that *kairos* is neither random nor accidental. Instead, it emerges from an ecology of conditions and contexts that develop quietly over time. *Kairos* represents the convergence of preparation and opportunity, shaped by who one has become and what the moment demands. Understanding *kairos* as contextual rather than episodic shifts attention from chance to responsibility, foregrounding how careers are cultivated long before decisive moments appear. Still drawing on my personal experiences, this paper examines the conditions that make *kairos* visible, credible, and actionable in academic and professional careers. Particular attention is given to mentorship and guidance, networks and relationships, persistence in *chronos*, alignment with personal needs, openness to ordinary events, courage and risk, and institutional timing. Together, these conditions form an interdependent system—an ecology—in which *kairos* can travel, be recognized, and be acted upon. The analysis highlights that mentorship and networks position individuals near opportunity; persistence and preparation generate readiness; personal misalignment sharpens discernment; openness allows ordinary signals to acquire meaning; courage transforms recognition into action; and institutional timing determines whether opportunity can be received. The paper reinforces the often-unspoken costs embedded in *kairos* moments. Acting on *kairos* frequently entails material and immaterial sacrifices, including uncertainty, emotional strain, reputational risk, disrupted relationships, and the relinquishing of alternative futures. Ignoring *kairos*, however, also carries costs, such as stagnation, regret, and erosion of inner conviction. By resisting romanticized accounts of *kairos* as effortless destiny, this paper presents it as a demanding encounter between preparation and possibility. Ultimately, the paper argues that *kairos* is not something to be engineered or awaited passively, but something to be cultivated through how one works, relates, endures, and remains open. Career-defining moments arise when an ecology of readiness allows opportunity to recognize those prepared to meet it.

KEYWORDS:

Attentiveness, Career development, Discernment, Kairos, Mentorship, Openness to the ordinary, Persistence and preparation, Professional relationships, Readiness, Timing and opportunity

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“Fortune favors the prepared mind.”

- Louis Pasteur

INTRODUCTION: KAIROS IS NOT RANDOM

Kairos moments often announce themselves as sudden interruptions in the ordinary flow of career life. An unexpected email, a funding call that seems to speak directly to you, a conversation that shifts your trajectory, and a quiet but insistent inner conviction that something must change—now. These perspectives have been exhaustively dealt with in the first to fourth papers of this series.¹⁻⁴ Because these moments feel decisive and transformative, they are often interpreted as episodes of luck or rare flashes of opportunity. Yet, when examined judiciously, *kairos* is neither random nor accidental. It is the visible crown of a long, largely invisible wave of preparation and contexts—conditions, circumstances, and environments—that serve as fertile breeding grounds for *kairos* manifestation. *Kairos* emerges from conditions that have been forming quietly over time. Intellectual discipline, accumulated skills, trusted relationships, prior sacrifices, institutional cultures, personal constraints, and even moments of doubt all shape the space in which *kairos* can appear. What looks like a sudden opening is often the convergence of readiness with opportunity. In this sense, *kairos* is not merely about *timing*; it is about *fit*—the alignment between who one has become and what the moment demands.

Understanding *kairos* as contextual rather than random shifts the focus from chance to responsibility. It invites us to ask not only *whether* we recognize *kairos*, but also *what it costs* to prepare for it, to respond to it, and sometimes to miss it. These costs are both material and immaterial.⁵ Some are visible—lost income, geographic relocation, temporary insecurity, or delayed stability. Others are quieter but no less consequential—emotional strain, fear of disappointing mentors, disruption of family life, identity tension, and the psychological burden of choosing one future while relinquishing others.⁵

Career-defining *kairos* moments rarely arrive without demanding something in return. To act on them often requires courage to move before certainty is available, to accept short-term losses for long-term growth, or to leave comfort for alignment.⁴ To ignore them, on the other hand, also carries costs: stagnation, regret, narrowing of possibility, and the slow erosion of inner conviction.⁵ *Kairos* thus places individuals at a crossroads where every option has a price, and inaction is itself a form of choice. Importantly, *kairos* is not shaped only by professional ambition. Personal life conditions—family responsibilities, emotional well-being, geographical ties, and values—are not peripheral to *kairos*; they are central to it. Moments of alignment often arise precisely where professional opportunity intersects with personal necessity. In such instances, *kairos* demands not just strategic thinking, but also moral and emotional reckoning. The question becomes not merely “Is this good for my career?” but “Does this allow me to live more fully, more honestly, and more sustainably?”

In this sixth paper of the *Art of Career Time and Timing* series, I discuss the conditions and contexts that shape *kairos* moments in academic and professional careers, with particular attention to the often-unspoken costs embedded within them. Still relying on personal experience and previous encounters with *kairos*, I focus on how mentorship, institutional environments, networks, persistence, and openness to seemingly ordinary events create fertile ground for *kairos* to thrive. At the same time, I reflect on the sacrifices—visible and invisible—that accompany decisive actions: the risks taken, the relationships strained, the comforts relinquished, and the emotional labor required to trust an inner witness when external validation is absent or delayed. By foregrounding cost, this article resists romanticizing *kairos* as effortless destiny. Instead, it presents *kairos* as a demanding encounter between preparation and opportunity—one that rewards attentiveness, but also exacts a toll. Recognizing *kairos*, I argue, is only the beginning of the *kairos* journey. What ultimately shapes a career is how one navigates the conditions and contexts around it, weighs the costs involved, and summons the courage to act when the moment arrives.

CONDITIONS AND CONTEXTS THAT SHAPE CAREER *KAIROS* MOMENTS

In the sections that follow, I unpack these conditions and contexts (Figure 1) in detail, illustrating how *kairos*

is not detached from life but deeply embedded within it—formed at the intersection of context, constraint, conviction, and choice.

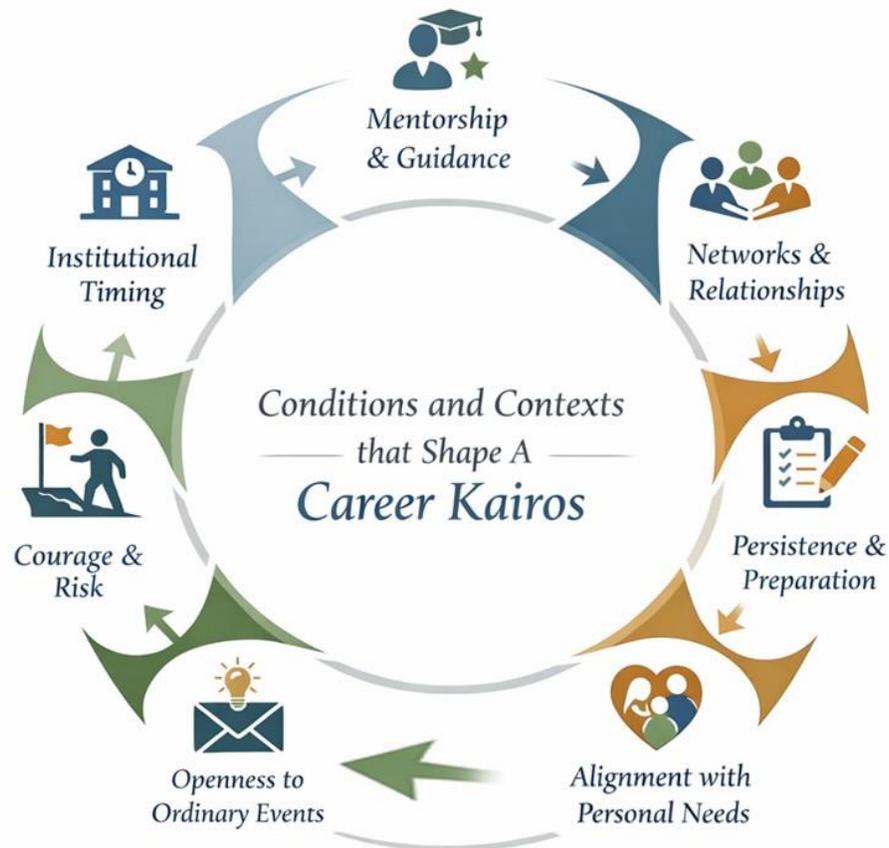


Figure 1. Conditions and contexts that shape career *kairos*

Condition 1: Mentorship and Guidance

In any career, mentorship is a fundamental pillar of professional development, serving as a catalyst for career advancement, skill acquisition, and personal growth. Through guidance, feedback, and role modelling, mentorship bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering insights that extend well beyond the classroom. It helps individuals navigate complex professional environments, make informed decisions, and develop the confidence needed to grow with purpose and direction (Figure 2).

Nearly every *kairos* moment in my career was shaped, in one way or another, by mentors. Not because they predicted my success, and not because they always saw what I saw, but because their presence positioned

me close enough to opportunity to recognize it when it appeared. Mentorship, in this sense, did not create *kairos* for me; it created the *conditions* in which *kairos* could emerge. For instance, during my PhD, one of the most decisive *kairos* moments of my early career arose from what initially seemed like a casual suggestion by my supervisor. Although her framing was cautious, yet, that became the turning point in my PhD journey. For her, the application was a learning exercise; for me, it became a turning point. What matters here is not the outcome—though it was transformative—but the role of mentorship in making the opportunity visible. Without my supervisor’s guidance, I might not have been attentive to the call, or I might have dismissed it as something meant for others, later, when I was “more ready.”

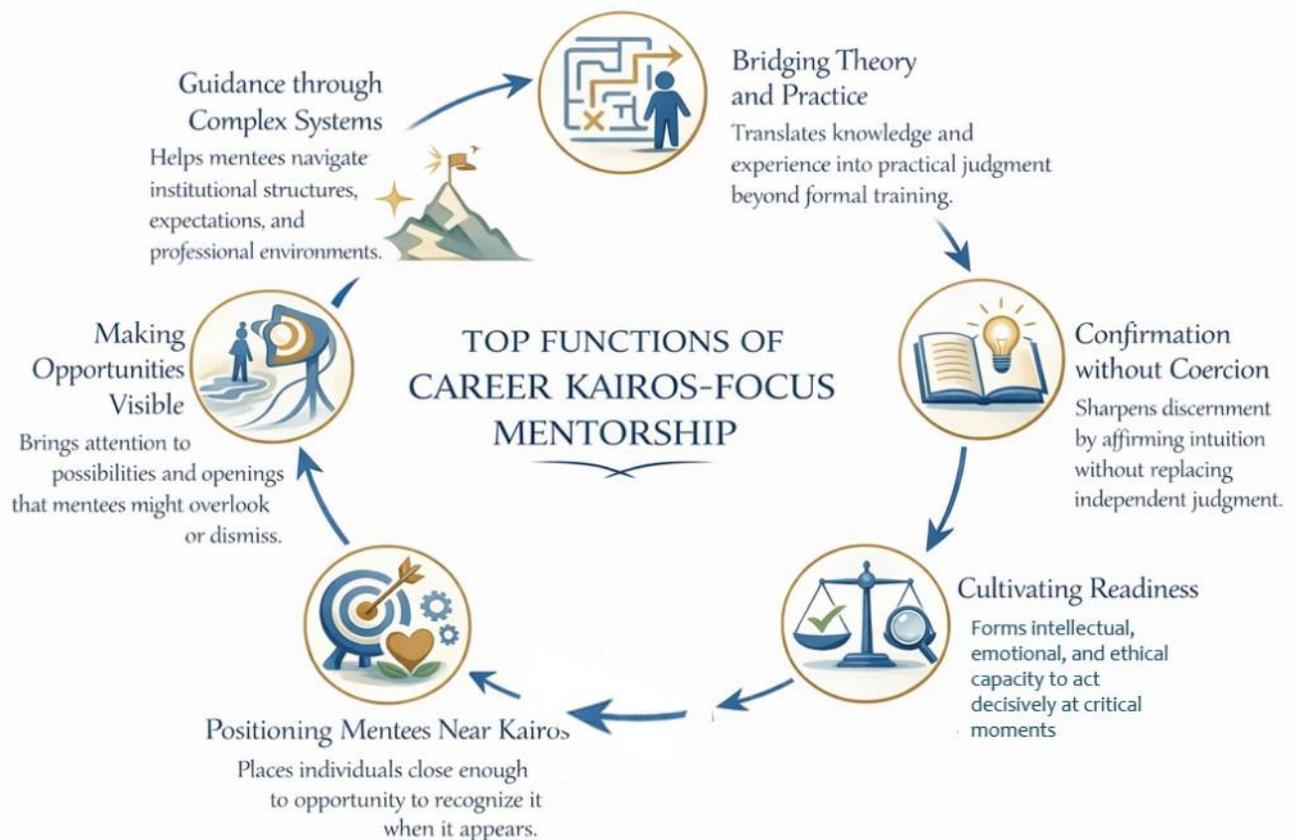


Figure 2. Top functions of mentorship, particularly as it relates to career *kairos*

Mentors often act as translators of institutional rhythms. They know when calls appear, how systems work, and which doors—even if only slightly ajar—are worth approaching. Even when their expectations are restrained, their guidance places their mentees in the proximity of possibility. Importantly, mentorship does not always come with full endorsement. My supervisor did not share my conviction; she did not foresee success. Yet her openness to letting me try was enough. This reveals an important feature of *kairos*: mentors do not need to recognize your *kairos* for it to be real. Sometimes, their role is simply to refrain from closing the door.

Later in my career, mentorship played a different but equally vital role. When I contemplated applying for a fellowship that would allow me to reunite my professional life with my family, the inner witness was strong, but the emotional and reputational costs felt

heavy. I worried about how my supervisor might perceive my decision. I worried about appearing disloyal, impatient, or ungrateful. In this vulnerable space, I shared my draft application with a trusted mentor from earlier in my career. Her response—“those who designed this call had you in mind”—did not create my conviction, but it steadied it. It transformed private courage into sustained resolve. This points to a second function of mentorship: confirmation without coercion. Good mentors do not replace your judgment; they sharpen it. They do not push you toward decisions that serve their interests; they reflect back what they see in you, often at moments when self-doubt is loudest. In *kairos* moments, such affirmation can carry immense immaterial value. It reduces psychological friction, legitimizes intuitive insight, and provides emotional ballast when the risks feel overwhelming.

Yet mentorship also has limits, and recognizing those limits is part of maturity. When I decided to leave a comfortable postdoctoral environment to pursue alignment between family and work, I did so without first consulting my immediate supervisor at the time applied for the position to take me away. This was not an act of rebellion or disloyalty, but of self-preservation. *Kairos* sometimes requires private preparation, especially when power dynamics, expectations, or institutional loyalties might complicate openness. Mentorship, while invaluable, cannot always absorb the full weight of a *kairos* decision.

What these experiences taught me is that mentorship is not about being led step by step into the right moment.

Rather, it is about being formed—intellectually, emotionally, and ethically—so that when *kairos* appears, one has the discernment to recognize it and the courage to act (**Figure 3**). Mentors cultivate readiness. They expose us to opportunities, model judgment, offer reassurance, and occasionally provide the restraint that keeps us grounded. In this way, mentorship is a foundational condition of *kairos*. It is part of the soil, not the seed. It does not guarantee success, nor does it eliminate risk. But without guidance—formal or informal, present or remembered—many *kairos* moments would pass unnoticed, dismissed as premature, or abandoned under the weight of fear.

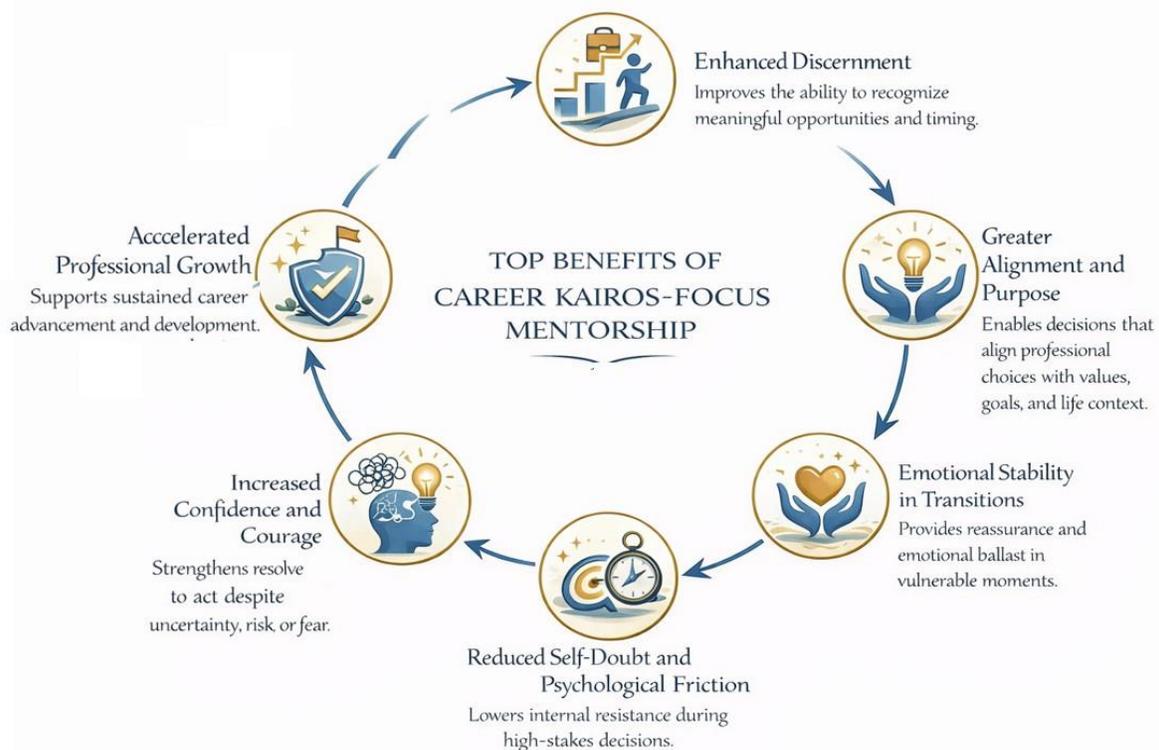


Figure 3. Top functions of benefits, particularly as it relates to career *kairos*

Condition 2: Networks and Relationships

More often, career *kairos* moments travel quietly through networks and relationships, revealing itself not through formal channels alone but through human connections. While job advertisements, funding calls, and institutional announcements matter, many career-defining moments unfold in the spaces between them—in conversations, emails, shared histories, and mutual trust built over time. For this reason,

relationships and career networks cannot be treated as incidental or transactional. They require intentional cultivation, attentiveness, and care, because it is within these relational spaces that opportunity is often first signaled, interpreted, and made accessible. My own *kairos* moments repeatedly emerged through such relational pathways, underscoring that networks are not peripheral to *kairos*; they are often its primary conduit.

One of the clearest examples occurred during my first postdoctoral transition. At the time, I was exploring opportunities abroad, guided by a growing inner conviction that it was time to move on. As part of that process, I reached out to a former mentor to request a recommendation letter for a position I had applied for. The request itself was ordinary, even procedural. Yet, within that exchange, something unexpected happened. In the course of our conversation, he mentioned that he had just announced a postdoctoral position and invited me to apply. This opportunity did not come through an open call that I had tracked or strategically targeted. It emerged through a relationship—through the continuity of trust, mutual respect, and professional familiarity established years earlier. Had I limited my interactions to immediate institutional circles, or hesitated to reconnect out of fear of imposing, this *kairos* moment might never have surfaced. Instead, the relationship functioned as a living channel through which opportunity flowed.

This experience taught me that networks are not simply collections of contacts; they are reservoirs of shared memory. When people know your work, your character, and your trajectory, they can recognize alignment on your behalf—even before you articulate it yourself. In this sense, networks extend our perceptual reach. They allow *kairos* to find us, not because we engineered it, but because we remained relationally present and relevant. However, maintaining such networks comes with costs that are rarely acknowledged. Relationships require time, emotional investment, and vulnerability. Reaching out for a recommendation letter, for instance, is not a neutral act. It exposes aspiration, dependence, and the possibility of refusal. Sustaining networks across countries and career stages demands effort that is often invisible and unrewarded in formal metrics. Yet, without this relational labor, many *kairos* moments would remain dormant.

The role of networks became even more pronounced in my transition to a tenured position. What began as a mass email—sent to respiratory researchers worldwide—could easily have been ignored as just another announcement in an overflowing inbox. But when I read it, something resonated deeply. I responded immediately, and within hours received a personal reply from the center director, inviting me to

an online meeting. That initial exchange marked the beginning of a relational process rather than a transactional one. Conversations flowed naturally, visits followed, and trust developed incrementally. Each interaction closed a gap—of understanding, of expectation, of cultural difference. Long before the position was formally advertised, a relationship had already formed. By the time the official process unfolded, familiarity and mutual confidence were already in place.

This illustrates an important feature of *kairos*: relationships do not shortcut merit, but they create interpretive context. They allow decision-makers to see not just a CV, but a person—someone whose values, curiosity, and ways of thinking are known. *Kairos*, in such cases, is not favoritism; it is recognition emerging from sustained interaction. Yet, relational *kairos* also carries immaterial costs. Engaging deeply with new professional environments requires openness and emotional availability. Visiting repeatedly, investing time without guarantees, and holding hope in uncertainty all demand resilience. Moreover, relational alignment sometimes brings difficult choices. Accepting the tenured position meant declining other valued relationships, including the opportunity to continue working with a previous supervisor whose work I deeply respected. *Kairos* gained through one relationship may require letting go of another.

What becomes clear through these experiences is that *kairos* is not an isolated moment of individual brilliance. It is relationally produced. Networks do not merely distribute information; they shape possibilities. They amplify readiness, surface hidden opportunities, and transform anonymous systems into human encounters. At the same time, networks are not instruments to be exploited. They must be nurtured with integrity, generosity, and patience—often long before they yield visible outcomes. *Kairos* rewards such relational investment, but it also tests it. Those who isolate themselves may preserve autonomy, but they risk invisibility. Those who remain connected accept vulnerability, but they position themselves where *kairos* is more likely to pass. In this way, networks and relationships are not guarantees of *kairos*, but conditions and contexts that make its appearance possible—and its recognition meaningful.

Condition 3: Persistence and Preparation

Kairos may feel exceptional, even dramatic, but it almost never rewards idleness. It meets those who have remained faithful to ordinary work—those who persist through routine, uncertainty, and delayed recognition. Behind every *kairos* moment lies a long stretch of *chronos*: days structured by repetition, effort without applause, and progress so incremental that it is barely perceptible at the time. Persistence in *chronos* is not glamorous, but it is foundational—the platform on which *kairos* becomes fertile. Without it, *kairos* has nothing to land on.

My earliest clear experience of this came during my PhD. When the doctoral funding opportunity was announced, I was only nine months into my program. By conventional metrics, this was not enough time to be “ready.” I had no publications, limited results, and was still navigating the preparatory stages of my project. Yet those nine months had been marked by disciplined engagement. I had immersed myself in the literature, started clarifying research questions, on the process of building needed methodological competence, and developing a strong intellectual narrative for my work. None of this was visible externally in the form of publications or other enumerated metrics, but it existed internally as coherence and depth. When *kairos* arrived in the form of the funding call, it did not ask how long I had been enrolled; it asked whether I had something meaningful to say. The intensity with which I wrote the application—the ease with which ideas surfaced, the clarity of argument, the sense of inevitability—was not spontaneous inspiration alone. It was the release of accumulated preparation. The application succeeded not because I had waited for the “right” time, but because I had treated ordinary time seriously.

This pattern repeated itself throughout my career. Each fellowship application, postdoctoral move, and institutional transition drew upon skills and capacities forged long before the opportunity appeared. The postdoctoral position I accepted abroad may have seemed like a bold leap, but it rested on years of methodical training, intellectual risk-taking, and scholarly persistence. The environment I entered was demanding, filled with world-class expertise and

advanced tools. I was able to grow within it because I had already learned how to work hard in obscurity.

Persistence, however, comes with costs that are often underestimated. Sustained preparation demands patience in the face of delayed reward. It requires tolerating periods when effort appears disproportionate to outcome. During those years, there were moments of doubt—times when peers advanced faster, when opportunities passed without notice, when the future felt ambiguous. Remaining committed during such phases exacts an emotional toll. It tests identity, confidence, and resilience. Yet this very endurance becomes part of what *kairos* recognizes. When I later applied for a fellowship that would allow me to reunite my professional and family life, the alignment was striking. The call seemed to describe my profile with uncanny precision. That alignment was not coincidental. It reflected years of cumulative choices—projects selected, skills honed, questions pursued—that gradually shaped a trajectory. *Kairos*, in that moment, was not a deviation from my path; it was its natural continuation. The tenured position followed the same logic. By the time the opportunity emerged, my scholarly profile, leadership experience, and intellectual vision had matured through persistent effort across multiple contexts. The confidence I felt in responding immediately to the announcement did not come from arrogance or impulse; it came from knowing, at a deep level, that my preparation matched the moment. Years of consistent work had quietly calibrated me to recognize fit and alignment.

What becomes evident across these experiences is that *kairos* does not suspend the laws of effort; it intensifies their returns. Preparation does not guarantee *kairos*, but it conditions us to recognize it and to respond without hesitation when it appears. Those who persist in *chronos* develop not only competence, but discernment. They learn when to wait and when to move. At the same time, persistence must be distinguished from rigidity. Preparation is not about accumulating credentials indiscriminately or grinding endlessly without reflection. It is about sustained, purposeful engagement—about allowing daily work to shape one’s readiness for moments that cannot be scheduled. In this sense, *kairos* is not magic. It is the visible convergence of unseen labor. The breakthrough

is real, but it is earned. Persistence and preparation form the quiet architecture beneath career-defining moments, ensuring that when opportunities arrive, they finds someone capable of meeting them.

Condition 4: Alignment with Personal Needs

Kairos is often discussed in professional terms—funding, positions, promotions, prestige. Yet some of the most decisive *kairos* moments in a career are shaped not by ambition alone, but by deeply personal circumstances. Family, emotional well-being, belonging, and the need for coherence between life and work are not peripheral to *kairos*; they are among its most potent conditions and contexts. When personal needs fall out of alignment, they generate a quiet urgency that sharpens discernment and prepares one to act.

One of the most consequential *kairos* moments of my career emerged from such misalignment. My postdoctoral position abroad was, by any objective measure, an enviable opportunity. I was working in a stimulating environment, surrounded by world-class experts, advanced tools, and intellectual challenges that stretched me daily. Professionally, the conditions were excellent. Personally, however, something fundamental was broken. My young children and family were far away, in another country. The physical distance translated into emotional strain—frequent travels, repeated and painful goodbyes, and the lingering ache of absence. This separation carried an immaterial cost that no CV could capture. Each departure weighed heavier than the last. The excitement of professional growth was increasingly accompanied by a sense of incompleteness. I was advancing, yet fragmented. Over time, that tension created a hunger—not merely for another position, but for alignment. I needed a way to bring family and work into closer proximity, to inhabit my professional life without feeling that it came at the expense of something essential.

At first, it was natural and easy to resist this realization. Leaving a prestigious postdoc so soon felt irresponsible. My supervisor had invested in me and had long-term plans for my development. I worried about how my search for another opportunity might be perceived. Would it appear disloyal? Would it

undermine trust? These concerns were not trivial; they represented real reputational and relational costs. Yet the inner witness grew stronger with time. The discomfort I felt was not restlessness—it was misalignment asking to be addressed. It was within this context that the fellowship opportunity appeared. Objectively, it was highly competitive and demanding. Subjectively, it felt uncannily precise. The more I studied the call, the clearer the alignment became: my research profile, my career trajectory, and my personal needs converged in a way I had rarely experienced before. What allowed me to recognize this *kairos* so clearly was not just professional readiness, but the acute awareness of what was missing in my life.

Had I been fully content, I might have skimmed past the announcement or postponed action. Comfort can dull vigilance. Discomfort, by contrast, heightens attention. Longing clarifies values. Frustration reveals what truly matters. In this sense, personal misalignment is not an obstacle to *kairos* but a preparatory condition. It sensitizes us to opportunities that promise not just advancement, but integration.

Responding to this *kairos* required courage of a different kind. Professionally, I was well prepared. Emotionally, the risk felt immense. I applied quietly, without informing my current supervisor at the time, carrying the weight of secrecy and uncertainty alone. The cost of this silence was real. Yet it was necessary to protect a fragile decision until it could stand on its own. When external confirmation eventually arrived, it did not create the conviction; it affirmed what had already been discerned under pressure. Looking back, it is clear that this *kairos* moment was not simply about moving institutions. It was about restoring coherence between who I was as a researcher and who I was as a parent. The opportunity mattered because it allowed me to live more whole. The courage to act emerged not from ambition, but from the refusal to accept permanent fragmentation as the price of success.

This experience reshaped my understanding of *kairos*. It taught me that moments of opportunity often arise where personal strain and professional readiness intersect. Stress, longing, and dissatisfaction are frequently framed as signs of failure or weakness. Yet, when approached reflectively, they can become

signals—indicators that a different alignment is possible and necessary. *Kairos*, in this light, is not only about seizing opportunity; it is about honoring the full complexity of one's life. Conditions of personal misalignment do not guarantee *kairos*, but they prepare the heart and mind to recognize it when it appears. And when acted upon with courage, such *kairos* moments do more than advance a career—they restore balance, integrity, and a sense of belonging to one's own life.

Condition 5: Openness to Ordinary Events

Perhaps the most elusive—and most easily overlooked—condition and context of *kairos* is openness to the ordinary. While *kairos* is often imagined as a dramatic interruption, it more frequently arrives disguised as routine: an email among many, a brief exchange in a hallway, a phone call taken between meetings. What distinguishes *kairos* in these moments is not the event itself, but the attentiveness of the person encountering it. *Kairos* does not always announce itself with urgency; it often whispers through the familiar rhythms of *chronos*.

One of the most consequential *kairos* moments of my career arrived in precisely this manner. The announcement of the tenured came as a mass email, circulated widely among researchers across the world. It was easy to miss. Inbox fatigue, competing priorities, and the ordinariness of such announcements create perfect conditions for indifference. My colleague and I received the same message, at the same time, under the same circumstances. Yet our responses diverged almost immediately. For me, the moment the email appeared, something resonated deeply. The inner witness spoke with clarity and speed: this is yours. That recognition was not the result of extraordinary information or privileged access. It emerged from attentiveness—an openness to let an ordinary message interrupt my mental routine. I responded that same day. The outcome that followed was shaped by many factors, but the *kairos* itself was born in that initial act of noticing.

This contrast revealed something essential about *kairos*: opportunity is not always scarce; attentiveness is. The same conditions are often available to many, but only a few perceive their significance. Openness to ordinary events is therefore not about luck or intuition

alone; it is about a cultivated posture toward daily life—a willingness to pause, to listen, and to ask whether something seemingly ordinary might matter more than it first appears.

Looking back, this pattern repeats across other transitions in my career. The postdoctoral move that expanded my intellectual horizon emerged during a simple request for a recommendation letter. What could have remained a procedural exchange became the gateway to a new chapter because I remained open to where the conversation might lead. Similarly, the doctoral funding opportunity that transformed my PhD trajectory began as a routine announcement—one among several that circulated periodically. Its significance only became clear because I allowed myself to engage with it fully rather than dismiss it as premature.

Openness, however, comes at a cost. To remain attentive in ordinary time requires resisting automation. It demands presence in a world that rewards speed and distraction. Emails are skimmed, conversations half-heard, opportunities postponed indefinitely. Cultivating openness means slowing down enough to notice resonance, even when there is no immediate guarantee of reward. It means allowing oneself to be interrupted—not only externally, but internally—by a sense that something deserves attention. There is also a psychological cost. Responding to ordinary events with seriousness can feel risky. Acting on a mass email or a casual suggestion exposes one to the possibility of rejection, embarrassment, or wasted effort. It is often easier to protect oneself by dismissing early signals as insignificant. Yet this protective instinct, while understandable, can dull the very sensitivity that *kairos* requires.

What my experiences taught me is that *kairos* often hides in plain sight. It is embedded in everyday structures—in institutional routines, professional communications, and ordinary interactions. These are not neutral spaces; they are fertile ground. But *kairos* does not announce which of these moments matter. Discernment is required, and discernment depends on openness. This openness is not indiscriminate enthusiasm. It is selective attentiveness, shaped by preparation and self-knowledge. The reason certain

ordinary events resonated with me was not because I chased everything, but because I had clarity about my own trajectory, my needs, and my readiness. Openness without direction leads to noise; direction without openness leads to blindness. *Kairos* emerges where the two meet.

In the end, openness to ordinary events is a quiet discipline. It does not require constant vigilance or anxiety about missing out. Rather, it asks for presence—a willingness to meet daily life with curiosity and responsiveness. Ordinary *chronos* moments often carry extraordinary *kairos* seeds. Whether they take root depends less on the rarity of opportunity than on our readiness to notice, to pause, and to act when something familiar suddenly feels different.

Condition 6: Courage and Risk

If recognition is the moment *kairos* becomes visible, courage is the force that brings it to live. Without courage, *kairos* remains an internal realization—clear, compelling, and ultimately unrealized. Every *kairos* moment in my career demanded not only discernment, but the willingness to accept risk. In this sense, courage is not an optional virtue; it is a constitutive condition of *kairos* itself. Courage is often misunderstood as confidence or fearlessness. In reality, it is the capacity to act while fear is present. *Kairos* rarely arrives when risks are minimal. On the contrary, it tends to surface precisely at moments when the costs of action are tangible and the outcomes uncertain. To respond to *kairos* is to step into ambiguity, often without full assurance that the choice will be rewarded.

My earliest experience of this came during my PhD funding application. Objectively, the risk seemed low—I could apply and fail without immediate penalty. Yet subjectively, the stakes felt high. Applying meant exposing myself to evaluation before I felt ready, contradicting implicit norms about timing, and risking internal disappointment if the conviction I felt proved misplaced. Courage, in this case, took the form of trusting an inner witness over conventional wisdom. It required submitting an application that mattered deeply to me, knowing that rejection would sting precisely because of that conviction.

As my career progressed, the risks associated with *kairos* grew more substantial. When I decided to leave

a comfortable postdoctoral environment to pursue alignment with my family life, courage took on a heavier weight. The professional costs were real: potential damage to my reputation, the loss of a prestigious environment, and the possibility of being perceived as disloyal or impatient. Emotionally, the risk was even greater. Acting on *kairos* meant confronting guilt, uncertainty, and the fear of disappointing mentors who had invested in my growth. What made this decision particularly difficult was that nothing was “wrong” professionally. The position was strong, the environment supportive, and the trajectory promising. Yet *kairos* rarely announces itself through dissatisfaction alone. Sometimes, it appears as a quiet insistence that something good is no longer enough. Courage, in such moments, involves leaving not because of failure, but because of fit and alignment. This kind of risk is especially challenging, because it cannot be justified easily to others—or even to oneself—using conventional metrics.

The tenured position demanded a different form of courage. Responding immediately to a mass email, engaging deeply before a formal position was announced, and later declining an invitation to remain in a valued research group all involved reputational and relational risk. Saying no to a respected supervisor was not an act of ambition; it was an act of fidelity to discernment. Courage here was not impulsive action, but sustained commitment—returning for multiple visits, investing time without guarantees, and remaining open while the outcome remained uncertain.

Across these experiences, a pattern emerges: courage in *kairos* is rarely dramatic. It is quiet, internal, and often lonely. It involves carrying conviction without public validation, acting before outcomes are secure, and accepting responsibility for choices that cannot be fully explained in advance. This form of courage exacts immaterial costs—emotional strain, self-doubt, and the burden of ownership over one’s decisions. Yet courage also reshapes identity. Each time I acted on *kairos*, my capacity to trust discernment strengthened. Courage, once exercised, becomes cumulative. It builds a kind of moral memory—a record of having acted faithfully before, even when the risks were real. This memory does not eliminate fear, but it places fear in context. It allows one to act again. Importantly,

courage does not guarantee success. Not every *kairos* moment yields immediate or visible reward. But without courage, even the most perfectly aligned *kairos* remains inert. Recognition without action changes nothing.

In this sense, courage is the hinge on which *kairos* turns. It transforms preparation into movement, alignment into decision, and insight into lived reality. To cultivate courage is therefore to accept risk as intrinsic to meaningful careers. It is to understand that the price of avoiding risk is often higher than the price of taking it: stagnation, regret, and the quiet erosion of trust in one's inner witness.

Condition 7: Institutional Timing

Kairos does not unfold in a vacuum. Even the strongest inner conviction and the deepest preparation must encounter an external structure capable of receiving them. Institutions—universities, funding bodies, research centers—operate according to their own temporal logics. They open and close windows of possibility through calls, cycles, reviews, and strategic priorities. Institutional timing, therefore, becomes a crucial condition of *kairos*: the alignment between personal readiness and organizational openness.

One of the earliest illustrations of this in my career came during my PhD. The doctoral funding positions were not continuously available; they appeared periodically, governed by institutional calendars and budgetary cycles. My readiness to apply coincided with one such opening. Had the call appeared a year earlier, perhaps I may not have had the intellectual coherence required. Had it appeared a year later, the urgency and intensity that propelled my application might have dissipated. The *kairos* lay not only in my conviction, but in the institution's momentary willingness to receive a candidate at my stage.

Institutional timing often carries a paradox: it feels impersonal, yet its consequences are deeply personal. Calls are announced broadly, eligibility criteria are standardized, and selection processes strive for neutrality. Yet whether a call aligns with one's career trajectory, life circumstances, and accumulated preparation is profoundly individual. My successful PhD application was not simply about merit; it was

about encountering an institutional opening at a moment when my emerging skills could be meaningfully recognized.

This dynamic became even more evident during my postdoctoral transitions. The opportunity that led me abroad did not emerge from a long-term strategic search on my part. It appeared because a former mentor happened to announce a position at precisely the time I was discerning my next move. The institution was ready to recruit; I was ready to move. This coincidence was not accidental, but neither was it controllable. It reflected the meeting of two temporal streams—personal and institutional—that briefly flowed in the same direction.

Institutional timing also shaped one of the most emotionally charged *kairos* moments of my career: the fellowship that allowed me to return closer to my family. The fellowship call did not arise because of my personal need; it arose because the institution was pursuing particular priorities at that time. Yet the alignment between the call's focus and my research trajectory was so precise that it felt almost intentional. This is a hallmark of *kairos* shaped by institutional timing: when organizational priorities momentarily mirror personal direction, recognition becomes possible. Still, such alignment often demands decisive action. Institutions move on. Calls close. Strategic windows shift. *Kairos* requires responsiveness to these rhythms. When I encountered the announcement of the tenured position, I responded immediately—not because I was impatient, but because I understood the nature of institutional timing. Expressions of interest were invited before the position was formally advertised. Early engagement mattered. Those who hesitated risked being invisible, not because they were unqualified, but because the institution's attention had already begun to coalesce.

At the same time, institutional timing can impose costs. Responding to calls often requires rapid mobilization of energy, documents, and emotional focus. It can force decisions before full clarity is available, intensifying risk and uncertainty. For individuals balancing family responsibilities, geographic constraints, or ongoing commitments, institutional calendars can feel unforgiving. Yet *kairos* often resides precisely in these

narrow windows. What becomes clear through experience is that institutions do not reward waiting for perfect alignment. They reward responsiveness to their own tempo. This does not mean abandoning discernment; it means understanding the external rhythms that shape opportunity. *Kairos* emerges when personal readiness intersects with institutional openness—and that intersection is often brief.

Institutional timing, therefore, is neither destiny nor distraction. It is a structural condition that must be read and respected. Those who cultivate *kairos*-shaped careers learn to listen not only to inner conviction, but also to the temporal signals of institutions: when to prepare, when to wait, and when to act decisively. In the end, *kairos* is as much about *when* institutions are ready as about when individuals are. Recognizing this does not diminish agency; it refines it. It allows one to

move with awareness of larger temporal currents, positioning oneself where personal preparation and institutional possibility can meet—if only for a moment.

LESSONS: THE ECOLOGY OF *KAIROS*

When viewed in isolation, *kairos* moments can appear exceptional—almost mystical ruptures in the normal flow of a career. Yet when traced back through lived experience, a different pattern emerges. *Kairos* does not operate as a single cause-effect event. It behaves more like an ecology: a system of interdependent conditions that quietly interact over time until the moment of convergence becomes possible (Figure 4). From reflecting on my own career-defining moments, several lessons about this ecology of *kairos* become clear.

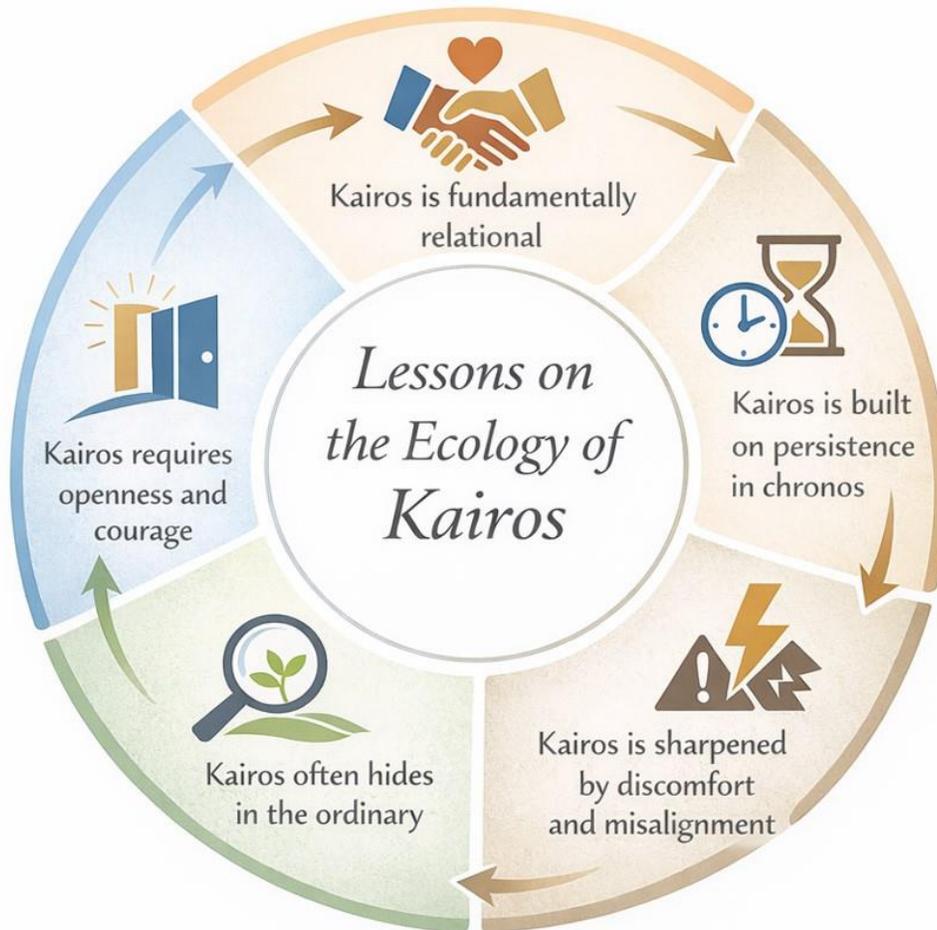


Figure 4. Lessons that can be derived from the ecology of *kairos*

First, *kairos* is fundamentally relational

Opportunities rarely arrive as abstract possibilities; they arrive through people. Mentors who mention a funding call, colleagues who forward an email, former supervisors who remember you when a position opens—these relationships act as conduits through which *kairos* travels. Importantly, mentors do not always recognize *kairos* at the moment it appears. Some encourage tentatively; others offer support only after the fact. Yet even limited guidance can be decisive. Relationships expand our perceptual field. They place us where opportunity can be seen, interpreted, and validated. Without such relational proximity, many *kairos* moments would pass unnoticed, not because they were absent, but because we were not positioned to see them.

Second, *kairos* is built on persistence in *chronos*

Every *kairos* moment I experienced rested on years of steady, often uncelebrated preparation. The apparent “suddenness” of success concealed long stretches of disciplined work: reading, writing, revising, learning methods, building competence, and enduring uncertainty. *Kairos* did not reward waiting; it met readiness. Persistence created credibility, clarity, and confidence—qualities that allowed alignment to occur when opportunity emerged. This underscores an uncomfortable truth: *kairos* amplifies prior effort, but it cannot replace it. Preparation is not optional; it is the substrate on which *kairos* depends.

Third, *kairos* is sharpened by discomfort and misalignment

Some of the most decisive moments in my career arose not during periods of contentment, but during tension—when professional growth came at personal cost, or when life felt fragmented. Discomfort has a way of clarifying values. Longing, strain, and frustration heighten attentiveness. They strip away complacency and force difficult questions to the surface. In this sense, personal challenges are not merely obstacles to be endured; they are conditions that sensitize us to *kairos*. When something essential is out of alignment, the right opportunity stands out with unusual clarity.

Fourth, *kairos* often hides in the ordinary

Rarely does *kairos* arrive with ceremony. More often, it appears as a routine email, a casual suggestion, a

request for a recommendation letter, or a mass announcement in an overflowing inbox. What distinguishes *kairos* is not the form it takes, but the response it evokes. Many of the most consequential moments in my career began as events others could easily have ignored. *Kairos* requires attentiveness to the ordinary. Those who dismiss ordinary signals too quickly risk missing extraordinary turning points embedded within them.

Fifth, *kairos* requires openness and courage

Recognition alone is insufficient. *Kairos* demands response, and response entails risk. Acting on *kairos* often means moving before full certainty is available, disappointing some expectations to honor others, or leaving environments that are comfortable but limiting. Openness, in this sense, is not passive receptivity; it is an active willingness to be disrupted. Courage transforms *kairos* from insight into reality. Without it, *kairos* remains a private realization—felt deeply, but never lived.

In summary, *kairos* is an ecological phenomenon

Taken together, these lessons reveal *kairos* as an ecological phenomenon rather than an isolated event. Mentorship, networks, persistence, personal circumstance, attentiveness, and courage interact dynamically, shaping when and how *kairos* becomes visible and actionable. Remove one condition, and *kairos* may still exist—but it becomes harder to recognize, harder to trust, and harder to seize. Understanding *kairos* ecologically also reframes failure and delay. Missed opportunities are not always failures of judgment; they may reflect missing conditions. Likewise, periods without visible *kairos* are not empty; they are formative. They are times when the ecology is being built—quietly, unevenly, often at cost. Ultimately, *kairos* is not something we manufacture, nor something we passively await. It is something we cultivate by how we work, relate, endure, and remain open. When the conditions align, *kairos* appears—not as a gift detached from effort, but as the moment when preparation, need, and opportunity finally recognize one another.

CONCLUSION: CULTIVATING CONDITIONS FOR *KAIROS*

Kairos is often understood as a moment to be recognized, but more fundamentally it is a condition to be cultivated. Career-defining moments do not arise from vigilance alone; they emerge from lives arranged in ways that make opportunity visible, credible, and actionable. Looking back to my own career, *kairos* moments rarely appear in isolation. They are rooted in long preparation, relationships, personal struggle, and openness to interruption. While timing itself remains elusive and partly beyond control, responsibility lies in how one inhabits the long stretches of *chronos*. Cultivation, rather than control, becomes the guiding principle. Relationships are central to this cultivation. Mentorship and professional networks are not peripheral advantages but foundational structures through which opportunity travels and conviction is clarified. Persistence also matters. Daily disciplines of learning, thinking, and refining one's craft accumulate as readiness, even when they exact costs such as uncertainty or delayed recognition. When *kairos* arrives, preparedness matters more than waiting. Equally important is attentiveness to misalignment between life and work. Discomfort often clarifies what kind of opportunity truly matters, allowing *kairos* to be recognized as integration rather than mere advancement. Finally, *kairos* demands openness to the ordinary. It often hides in routine exchanges and overlooked moments, requiring curiosity, presence, and the courage to act without full certainty. A *kairos*-shaped career is not about chasing exceptional moments, but about building an ecology of readiness in which preparation and possibility can meet.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared

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Reflection Exercises: The Conditions of *Kairos*

Exercise 1: Mentorship Map

- List your key mentors.
- How have they exposed you to opportunities?
- Who else might you invite into your circle of guidance?

Exercise 2: Network Audit

- Map your professional network (colleagues, former mentors, peers).
- Identify one relationship to strengthen this month.

Exercise 3: Persistence Journal

- Write about one season of steady effort in your life.
- How did it prepare you for an eventual breakthrough?

Exercise 4: Discomfort as Preparation

- Reflect on a current frustration or misalignment.
- How might this be sharpening you for a coming *kairos*?

Exercise 5: Ordinary Event Awareness

- Record three ordinary interactions (emails, conversations) this week.
- Ask: could one of these contain hidden *kairos*?

Exercise 6: Ecosystem of Readiness

- Draw a diagram of the seven conditions and contexts of *kairos* discussed (mentorship, networks, persistence, personal needs, openness, courage, institutional timing).
- Write one action step under each to cultivate it in your life.

Exercise 7: *Kairos* Soil Cultivation Commitment

- Draft a personal statement: “I will cultivate the soil of *kairos* by...”