

Fragment from Kairos. A New Engagement.

What are those mysterious moments in which we no longer see death as the end of a chronological line of events, but in which we are ourselves immortal, if only for a moment? In my new book, I call this the 'kairos' moment. In ancient times, Kairos was not only the other, but also the correct and true face of time, and according to Plato was even 'the best that can happen to a person', because this young, muscular and winged god provided an interval or intermezzo within the strict and monotonous time regime of his grandfather, Chronos. During that intermezzo, a person no longer experiences time the chronological line, but rather the past, present and future are balled, rolled or knotted together (Charles Taylor talks about 'kairotic knots') to create a dynamic form of time driven forth by one's own experience and which allows for change and new insights.

From ancient Greek times to Erasmus, who devoted an entire chapter to it in his *Adagia*, Kairos meant the 'interval' into which we fall if we slow down, take a pause, focus our attention or concentrate particularly well on something. Whereas Chronos stands for universal, static and quantitative time, which is necessary in order to place time in a linear relationship, kairos means that subjective, dynamic and qualitative moment which takes into account the specific and permanently changed circumstances, and for this reason can result in the birth of something new. Until the late sixteenth century, kairos continued to fascinate many a philosopher, statesman, theologian, doctor or poet, because kairos was the kind of time that mattered, time that provided opportunities or allowed for breakthroughs. During the Enlightenment, our attention surrounding this non-measurable dimension of time lessened, but after Nietzsche reintroduced it at the end of the 19th century, it started making a slow but steady comeback, and it also represented for various philosophers, writers, artists and scientists all those fleeting moments of beauty, visibility and energy that can make life so very special.

Focus, rest and careful consideration of arguments and circumstances are the most important conditions for creating a kairotic moment. That means both good timing and taking or making the most of the right opportunity or circumstance, which can present itself as a result of deep concentration. During the kairos interval, we are no longer hounded by a perceived lack of time, nor by any other type of time-related pressure or stress, but we experience a different dimension of time, which, as well as feeling larger, fuller and more pleasant, also conjures up new possibilities.

In the Kairos moment, past, present and future are bound together in the 'fullness of a visionary moment', as Martin Heidegger wrote in his work, *Being and Time* (1928). He also called it *Anfangliche Zeit*, the time that frees up new possibilities for us, because in the kairos moment, a break or caesura with Chronos time occurs, whereby a new start can be set in motion. In the world of science, kairos is sometimes also linked with the principle of serendipity, in other words 'the quality that allows a person to discover something good or new while seeking something else', as Robert Merton wrote in *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (1958). It refers to the fortunate and unexpected discovery of something unknown and, what is more, unsought, and which forms the basis for developing a new theory. A necessary condition, however, is that the researchers are given sufficient time, rest and freedom to explore new byways now and then, diverging from the beaten path of established research and perspectives. Chance

and luck play an important part in this respect, but so do intuition, alertness and creativity. What matters is that you remain sufficiently open to unexpected or previously formulated objectives and dare to think beyond prevailing theories, while at the same time being well prepared for that moment should it arise. Or, in the words of Louis Pasteur: 'The ability to be surprised at the "right moment" is the mind's first step towards discovery.'

In his Berkley lectures, Michel Foucault linked Isocrates' kairotic moment with the Greek concept of *parresia*, which means frank, honest and truthful speech. To Foucault, this type of truth-telling, 'le dire vrai', meant that the speaker was not afraid to speak out critically against established opinions and in doing so take a certain level of risk. Instead of interpreting already accepted opinions in order to secure one's own position within an institution, the speaker must find the courage to interpret his or her 'truth', and do so 'at the right moment'.

These essays are partly inspired by the work of the German Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch, who in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* associated the objective of art, literature, philosophy and education with what he called 'the fulfilled moment'. He found these 'transgressive' moments not only in art, music or philosophy, but also in everyday experiences, such as reflection and daydreaming. According to Bloch, the 'fulfilled moment' is 'time without clock-hands' and 'seizing eternity in the moment', which presents to us 'the shadow of what is yet to come', in other words, that which currently lies hidden within us as a mere possibility.

He felt that art, philosophy and education should be aimed precisely on those kairotic moments of exceptional focus, because it is in those moments that 'the boundlessness of the utopian prospect and the depth of perceived proximity' come together as one. According to Bloch, these are the perfect moments of inspiration because they do not only help transcend what already exists, but also motivate man's inner process of existence. It is at such kairotic moments that we are like horsemen riding to meet ourselves in the deep of the night. The old me, seated firmly in the saddle of established certainties, and the me yet to come, which is merely promise and possibility, gallop towards each other, and out of the subsequent lightning collision comes the new idea or insight that makes the new us. In that 'fulfilled moment', we get a glimpse of the new beginning in something that 'appears but is not yet manifest', something that lights up as a beacon on the horizon of our thoughts and fills us with the hope of something different and better. Bloch's way of thinking focusses entirely on making people aware of the importance of that creative process of 'becoming'. 'Man simply 'is'. But that is not enough. That is indeed the very least.'

It is precisely at times like these when materialism, technology and commercialism dominate the public realm that we should 'learn to hope again', as Bloch puts it, because otherwise we might ignore the most fundamental aspect of humanity, namely that we are not established facts (like objects), but rather beings in the making that are anchored in time. His concept of 'time as hope' can be regarded as constantly reaching for the unreachable, which provides wings for our thoughts and our imagination. A better future is not as far away as we sometimes think it is. New possibilities lie in wait for alert and creative spirits that know how to conjure up the right kind of amazement at the right time.