

Planning for Spontaneity or Preparing for Kairos in the Classroom

Kevin Gary

Valparaiso University

It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men [sic] die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.¹

— William Carlos Williams

What is the point of poetry? This question, William Carlos Williams suggests, misses the point. Poetry, like love, memory, or time itself, is a phenomenon that exceeds simple reduction. And yet this question, “What is the point?,” is how modern education, guided by standards, outcomes, and objectives, largely does its work. Lessons and unit plans lead with clearly articulated and measurable objectives. Consider this recurring objective from the Common Core State Standards in the U.S.: “Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details.”² When asked, “What is the point?,” teachers, guided by this standard, are equipped with a clear directive that conveys an important and transferable skill. Objectives like this one, especially in K-12 classrooms, are now often posted at the front of the class, noted by the teacher at the beginning of class, and then reviewed at the end.

Yu-Ling Lee, guided by Huebner and others, detects that something is amiss with this process. The poetry of our experience, he argues, is trampled underfoot by the technical managerial prose of the curriculum industry. Lee suggests that this linear, programmed approach, informed by a narrow epistemology, fails to appreciate our complex subjective ontologies, specifically our sense of being in time. *Vis-à-vis* time, Lee challenges us to dwell in or encounter time in a new way, which actually is an old way. He notes our being captive to a *chronos* vision of time, wherein all time is flattened out — all moments homogenous, repetitive points on a line that stretches out *ad infinitum*, akin to the omnipresent strip malls that look the same in Sacramento, as they do in Cleveland, as they do in El Paso. Within this frame, there are no significant wrinkles or knots (or places) in time; if you’ve been to one Applebee’s, you’ve been to them all.

In contrast to this dominant *chronos* vision of time, Lee recalls a *kairotic* understanding of time (now largely eclipsed), wherein certain times, certain moments, are not neutral points on an impersonal timeline, but are profoundly significant, personal, even sacred moments that puncture and disrupt ordinary time. He insinuates that all times, all moments, are potentially sacred — even this moment — reading this, right here, right now. Yet, given our *chronos* sensibilities, we are conditioned not to expect too much to happen.

Our *chronos* fixation aside, our desire (and need) for *kairos* persists. Constructive examples come to mind: a good conversation with an old friend that goes on far longer than we anticipated; being caught up in the “flow” of a worthwhile activity; or simply being captivated by a forest at sunset.³ Under the spell of *kairos*, time stands still, and there is release and freedom from the “slick treacherous monster” that is *chronos* time.⁴ Yet the pull of *chronos*, often fraught with anxiety, yanks us back. There is often a dialectical tug of war between whimsical *kairos* and agenda-driven *chronos*, captured musically in the Beatles’ song, “A Day in the Life.” The song begins, in

the first person, with a dream about events in the daily news, only to be interrupted by the rush of the morning routine: waking up late, gulping coffee, and hurrying to catch a bus on time. This urgent haste is then opened by a kairotic interlude: “Found my way upstairs and had a smoke, somebody spoke, and I went to a dream: ahh.” Is this not Marcel Proust’s tasting his Aunt Leonie’s madeleine put to music?

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? ... And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray ... when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me ...⁵

Proust and the Beatles both reveal the “complex possibilities of subjectivity” in time — the phenomenological zig and zag of time, present, past, and future. Yet while kairotic irruptions and diversions are part of our daily fare, chronos reigns supreme. Kairos is but an afterthought, and often, when we experience kairos, we miss “the meaning,” or do not know what to make of it.⁶ Our educational climate — efficient, goal-driven, and hyper-utilitarian — lacks the conceptual resources to name and recognize kairotic insights and revelations. As a consequence, we forget how to prepare for such encounters, tending to settle for the fast and cheap kairos afforded by virtual distractions and/or drugs, which offer, no doubt, a reprieve from the press of chronos time.

We have, to recall William Carlos Williams, forgotten how to read a poem, and are doubtful that there is much, if anything, worth finding there. This loss is powerfully diagnosed in Diane Senechal’s *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*.⁷ Senechal examines how our hyper-social media and our fidgety “turn, pair, and share” pedagogies have lost sight of the hard-won yet gracious moments of profound kairos that only come through slowness, solitude, and the kind of attention Simon Weil calls us to.⁸ The “chatter of the present,” Senechal notes, “cannot always grasp the present.”⁹

So what is a teacher to do? Lee’s mentor Huebner offers some direction. Huebner criticizes the hegemonic discourse of objectives (pre-determined outcomes) and learning (evidenced by measurable changes in performance) as failing to provide guidelines for a “third essential ingredient in the educational environment: the moment of vision.”¹⁰ By this, I take Huebner and Lee to mean those idiosyncratic, autobiographical breakthrough moments of insight, epiphanies that can never be vouchsafed by planning. Recognizing, soliciting, and welcoming such moments of vision “is the uniquely human quality of the environment and requires the presence of human wisdom.”¹¹ Herein, Huebner suggests, lies the unique “function of the teacher.”¹² The teacher stands as a mediator, or high priest, between the subject in all its beauty and perplexity, and the student, an initiate, often unsure of what it is they are looking for or what might be worth discovering.

Teachers cannot escape the world of chronos, nor should they. Classes will still be 50 minutes long and they need to start on time. But within that time, “what dreams may come,” what insights might emerge. Therein is the space and the need for a human wisdom that can recognize kairotic breakthroughs. This involves the paradoxical ability to plan for spontaneity — to jettison chronos outcomes at the right time, for the right student, for the right reason.

How do we prepare such teachers? To teach this alternative understanding of time, teachers must, first and foremost, live it. They must be cultivators of kairos. They need, as Abraham Heschel notes, a Sabbath sensibility and a practiced ability of making kairos the master of chronos, rather than vice versa. They must, like Martha, meticulously plan for the feast, but, like Mary, they must be able to stop the planning and preparation and actually be able to enjoy the feast with the guests (their students). They must be able to have the experience and grasp the meaning.

I believe Lee, guided by Augustine, Heidegger, and Huebner, is fighting the good fight. I worry, however, that the jargon he employs mystifies more than it clarifies. The techno-managerial curriculum managers, for all their flaws, tell a “clear,” “commonsensical” story. We must tell and show a different story; one that captures in compelling prose and poetry our complex subjectivities that live in time, present, past, and future.

1. William Carlos Williams, *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower and Other Love Poems* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1994), 34.

2. See <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/6/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2>

3. See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

4. For the phrasing, “slack-eyed monster,” I am indebted to Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), 5.

5. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Swann’s Way*, Vol. 1, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1927), 48-51.

6. T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 14.

7. Diane Senechal, *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude* (London: R&L Education, 2014).

8. See Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God,” *Waiting for God* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 105.

9. Senechal, *Republic of Noise*, 3.

10. Dwayne Huebner, “Curriculum as a Concern for Man’s Temporality,” *The Lure of the Transcendent: Collected Essays By Dwayne E. Huebner* (Routledge, 1999), 131-142.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.