

## Kairos, Kronos, and Coronavirus Time

Remarks prepared for Sunday morning Virtual Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology

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A few years ago, a memorable feature piece in *The New Yorker* mentioned both Pendle Hill and Kairos time. The story was of a young woman, who had gone missing from her post as a Montessori teacher on the island of St. Thomas. Her car keys, sundress, and sandals were found on the beach. This would not be so remarkable, except it wasn't the first time she had lost herself in water. In 2008, when she was about to begin teaching at a public school in Harlem, she also disappeared. Friends posted signs around the City, and it was covered by the press—and she was seen in a Starbucks and also captured on security footage an Apple Store. Then a Staten Island ferry captain spotted a woman's body floating near Robin's reef, the site of an old lighthouse in New York Harbor. A rescue boat was dispatched for recovery, but when a crew member touched her ankle, the woman came to life and began to cry.

Pieced together afterwards, it was discerned that she had slipped into the river during a full moon, lured to a spot several nights before by Japanese lanterns which apparently brought to mind a religious festival she had participated in as a child at the Japanese-American Church where her American parents served as clergy. The marriage split up as the husband became more conservative, and the mother, more spiritually broadminded, eventually leaving her post to reside at Pendle Hill. Her father became an itinerant minister, traveling to island cultures to preach and live with indigenous peoples. And although the young daughter's beliefs had also grown more inclusive, she continued to join her father for months at a time in the summer in his work which was frequently on islands.

She was diagnosed as suffering from dissociative fugue—as in music, a repetitive undertow of a phrase that appears and reappears in a musical composition.

Psychiatrists say, though rare, it is when someone enters into another state and forgets their identity entirely—forgets who and what they are. The Japanese lanterns it seemed might have triggered the sensation of her timeless time with her father—she was slipping back into this other part of who she also was by slipping into water.

When *New Yorker* writer, Rachel Aviv, asked the young woman's mother about her daughter's disease—after what would turn out to be the final disappearance (there had been others) in St. Thomas—her mother said she had “a kind of awe” at where “here daughter had been.” “The ancient Greeks had two words for time Kronos, chronological time, and Kairos, which often translates as the right time, and cannot be measured,” Rachel Aviv writes. Her mother said, “I imagined her as having entered more fully into Kairos, the right time, the fullness of time [where] there's a suspension of certainty.” The woman added that she thought that perhaps the medical profession had too narrow a point of view about her daughter's disease, that people often have difficulty understanding something with spiritual roots.

Kairos: the fullness of time, a sense of the eternal in the present.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote a long and much overlooked poem, meant to be a libretto for a Christmas opera, which he entitled, “For the Time Being.” Auden had returned to his Christian faith not long before his mother, who was a devout believer, had died. And the work is dedicated to his mother, Constance Rosalie Auden. It is the poet's attempt, he explained, to retell the Christmas story and make

it relevant in our time. It's a gorgeous and difficult poem. Part of Auden's thesis is that we are effectively caught on a continuum between the birth of Christ and the promised second coming. And our task is to enter time living fully and richly as we live Christ's teaching. When we do we live the wonder of the birth of Christ in the present time, we experience the fullness of time. The Time Being.

Joseph Campbell spoke of Kairos and Kronos as well, in the context of what he called the Christian myth. The image of the cross, he and others have noted, is the intersection of the two kinds of time. Christ's extended arms on the horizontal line literally mirror the horizon of the earth and represents the march of days that take place here on this planet. The vertical line of the cross on which the body is hung, is the thrust of divinity down from heaven, intersecting with our earth: Eternity in the form of the Divine enters our world.

I suppose we don't need Auden to remind us that real faith is how we behave, not what we say—following Christ's example and precepts by loving our neighbors as ourselves, no exceptions(!) and judging not lest we be judged. In truly nonjudgmental compassion, we have a chance for transcendence, to sense the presence of the Spirit. The Time Being.

Christ's path really was the hero's journey which in effect formed the basis for the individuation process that is at the core of Jungian psychology. On this path the individual comes into conflicts, suffers, loves, loses, and continues to grow with these experiences, integrating what sometimes seems like opposites, and working toward becoming whole.

And to my mind, this shares something important with Quaker thought. That is the process of discernment. Discernment is what Quakers call on to assess the validity of the leadings that arise in Quaker worship. Similarly, Jungians identify what comes up from the unconscious from dreams and images that grab us in life—which we try to differentiate or discern or decode the messages. Who is offering guidance that we should heed? What can we learn from the terrorizing figure that enters our nighttime world? Who or what is coming to bless and calm us in our dreams?

Fairy tales for Jung and the Jungians, are metaphors for individuation. The dark characters, as well as the heroic ones, the male and female and animal, the golden ball: everything in a fairy tale—as in a dream—represents active parts of a single psyche. They compete with the hero, lure him, try to destroy him, entice and enrapture him, as they all the while keep moving in a dynamic dance. When the youngest son sets out on the tasks at which his brothers have failed, he succeeds because he is led by his heart rather than his ego. He finds the buried gold, almost stumbling on it. He listens to the troll or talking fox that his older brothers galloped past. Getting truth from the shadier side or the instinctive side represented in animal characters, treating all with open equanimity (like a good Quaker), he gets the help he needs to compete his quest.

Our job then is not to follow the power of the dark, but to honor it rather than bury it—or flee from it.

Fairy tales take place in Kairos time—long ago, and far away, or as one Romanian fairy tale puts it,

**“At the end of the world, where there is no time and space, behind the seven mountains and the blind dog, where the world is cluttered up with boards, there was once a king...”**

By transcending time and space fairy tales come closer to the life of the soul, to liminal space.

Our task as humans—is to participate fully in the passage of time, marking the beauty of the ticking clock and its chimes, and in so doing feeling the moments of transcendence when they do visit us.

We learned from Donald Kalsched last year about the spark of the divine that connects us at birth to the a sense of eternity—and how this vital connection and its flow of energy or can be interrupted by trauma and take us out of time entirely.

Those of us who suffer from busy-ness (addictions) or the need to control everything—those of us who need to make sure that everything on our list gets done—those of us who suffer from over commitment, also know that we often feel disembodied keeping our rapid pace, even if others remark at our efficiency. (Once when I questioned my sister about the compulsiveness that runs in our family, she responded, “Compulsive people accomplish a lot.”)

But at what price?

Right now in Coronavirus time—the not knowing—which many people mentioned as one of the most difficult parts of this experience—is triggering amazing amounts of anxiety. One Jungian analyst, Joseph Lee, when discussing the pandemic, suggested we might think of this anxiety and fear as the guardians of a threshold which leads to a land of change at which we’ve not yet arrived.

Part of our reflection in naming this conference Kairos, Kronos, and Coronavirus Time was to honor the discomfort of not knowing, as well as the dark parts, including the loss and pain, and the shared pain we’ve felt and witnessed in our fellow human beings. This is what we tried to consider yesterday (Saturday, 23 May). Today we will try and honor the moments of love and beauty and generosity and kindness that people are experiencing.

One thought we shared together as a committee in planning this conference was that we not try to seek a solution, as we are still in the woods, just now—wandering, really. (Some people have mentioned how the word quarantine, from the Latin root for 40, actually relates to the 40 years during which the Jews wandered in the desert as well as the 40 days of Christ’s fasting and isolation in the desert when his faith was tested.)

This wandering and stillness and questioning are good things. The myths tell us, you can’t really find the Holy Grail if you are too single-minded about getting your hands on it during the journey. As both Donald Kalsched, Carl Jung, Marion Woodman, and so many others have suggested—for transformation to occur, we must hold the tension of these opposites—without expectations, to see what comes.

We put all the elements of the truth of our feelings—which includes fear and loathing, love and anger—and maybe add a little nonemotional (non-hysterical) facts from science—into the caldron. In the container, Jung would say, the emotions are what create heat and the fire for transformation. The change will come but what it will be, we must wait and see. This is the alchemy that so fascinated Jung.

And as Quakers—or simply-good intentioned people—we make an effort to try not to speak up from the fear and anger that we all feel. As Donald told us last year, “if you we speak up with hatred and anger, you remain a member of the Dark rather than an alchemist of the dark,” an alchemist, Jung would add, who changes the dark base metals of the world to gold.