

# **SPIRIT-LED EXCELLENCE**

**We passionately assert that quality is essential if the educational journey we provide is going to have a transforming impact on students, churches, communities, and nations. And yet, we have also taken the bold stance that we must also commit ourselves to some radically different assumptions of how quality is defined, who gets to define it, how it is measured, and how those definitions and measurements actually change from one context to another.**

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*Written by Anthony Blair, President of Evangelical Seminary and Professor of Leadership and Historical Studies; David Williams, Kairos Executive Partner; President of Taylor Seminary, and Greg Henson, CEO, Kairos University; President, Sioux Falls Seminary*

## A BETTER QUALITY OF QUALITY

Today his license to practice medicine would likely be revoked. He would be subject to scorn and ridicule. He would be laughed out of the college of physicians.

Who? He's a doctor in a story from David's childhood, a doctor who had treated David's brother for his serious asthma. When David's brother had an attack, it would get harder and harder to get a deep breath. Sometimes, he had to work so hard to inhale that it was painful just watching and listening to him trying to breathe. One day David's mother brought his brother home from the doctor after a very serious bout. The doctor had told her if they were away from home without his inhaler and he was really having difficulty breathing that she could give him a drag on her cigarette to help open up his lungs.

Seriously? Smoke a cigarette to treat an asthma attack? No doctor would do that today! We know now that smoking actually increases the frequency and severity of asthma attacks. But this story is set in a different context. It was in the 1960s, when the dangers of cigarette smoking weren't medically acknowledged. For many people, cigarette smoking was a pretty normal part of life then. All cars came with ashtrays, as did all waiting rooms. Medical professionals would even sometimes advertise cigarettes! And so family doctors recommended what seemed like good wisdom in their context.

But over time, quality practices changed. The fact that something as important as medical practice can change so significantly calls into question some of our own assumptions about standards of excellence. There is a tendency in all parts of our lives, and particularly in higher education, to codify certain assumptions of what constitutes "quality"—the word used most often in the Academy—and insist that those standards and codes apply across all contexts. We assume that the way we've always done it is the right way to do it, the way it should always be done, by everyone, everywhere.

We run up against this assumption quite often in Kairos, because we challenge some of those assumptions and break some of those rules. People frequently question how we ensure the quality of learning when we do a lot of things differently than other, more traditional, higher education institutions do them. Tony remembers his excitement upon first hearing of the Kairos experiment five years ago but also wondering how the Kairos education was either accreditable or creditable, given that some of the usual "standards" were not always followed. He's now a rather passionate interpreter of the Kairos way of doing things, particularly with others who come to us with the same question or concern. But it took some listening and, as we noted previously, some letting go of control.

This question of quality is actually one of the most important questions we can ask. And our answer is two-fold. First, yes, we passionately assert that quality is essential if the educational journey we provide is going to have the transforming impact on students, churches, communities, and nations that we believe God desires it to have. God's people deserve the best we can offer them, and God deserves the best they, too, can offer. So let us be clear on that from the start.

And yet, we have also taken the bold and provocative stance that, if we are to be a community of communities, led by the Spirit, an organization in motion that seeks to be communal, holistic, and transformational—all of the descriptions we offer about what Kairos is called to be in the world—then we must also commit ourselves to some radically different assumptions of how quality is defined, who gets to define it, how it is measured, and how those definitions and measurements actually change from one context, and one community, to another.

So, in this series we're going to explore that a bit. We'll look into some of the standards that have traditionally shaped theological education, particularly in the Western world, and then how Kairos has challenged, augmented, or transformed them for the better. In other words, we believe we've been actually invited to live and lead toward a better quality of "quality!" In the process, we should be able to better understand why we do what we do, and perhaps even get glimpses and nudges of how we can improve on it as we walk forward together. Some of this may feel familiar; other aspects may feel troubling at first. But we will trust that the whisper of the Spirit will lead us toward what is good and true, what reflects the quality of character of the excellent God who has called Kairos into existence.

By the way, we're not the first to reflect on such matters. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre initiated some aspects of this conversation a generation ago with his influential works *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, the latter of which is an assigned reading in our own PhD program. We tap into some of his thinking in this series, along with some additional theological and epistemological reflections that David wrote in a Kairos white paper on standards of excellence. Next, we'll see how Jesus broke quality control rules in his context, and when he invites us to do the same.

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## THE CONTEXT OF QUALITY

Those old enough to remember re-runs of the 1960s TV sitcom "Get Smart" will recognize the familiar line of its main character, the bumbling spy Maxwell Smart. After screwing something up yet again, he would almost touch his thumb with his forefinger, with only a small gap remaining, and announce, "Missed it by that much!" The context—a comedy show full of irony—was our clue to understand that he had actually missed it by a wide margin. We might be tempted to say that he'd "missed it by a mile!" That was a common phrase in David's childhood in Texas. That phrase was used when shooting basketballs, swinging at baseballs, or target shooting at the rifle range. And, just like Smart's miss was not a mere quarter inch, neither were the misses of David and his friends over 5000 feet astray.

In both cases, the context helps us understand the meaning. We're big on context at Kairos. We define proficiency of learning outcomes in terms of a student's cultural and vocational context.

We allow pathways to those outcomes to be informed by our partners in their own contexts. We define standards of excellence contextually as well.

If our immediate reaction is to feel a bit of skepticism about that, we may want to notice that Jesus did this too! The Pharisees had constructed a complex series of rules in order to protect the people from inadvertently breaking the Old Testament law, much like a farmer might build a fence around a ditch in his field to keep the cows from falling in. A number of those rules involved what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. One could do nothing that looked or felt like work, for instance, in order to appropriate “honor the Sabbath and keep it holy.” That was their standard of excellence.

But if a cow were to fall into one of those ditches in the field on the Sabbath, what should a farmer do? Allow the cow to remain there all day, in pain, perhaps dying as a result? Or rescue it? Jesus’ answer was simple and powerful: Save the cow! Poor people need their cows. The Sabbath was made to be a gift to them, not to further harm them. In fact, for Jesus, it was a wonderful day to heal them! And so he did.

He was not dishonoring the Sabbath by doing so, as the Pharisees charged. He was not disagreeing with the commandment or his Father in heaven. He was simply illustrating that the “standard of quality” for honoring the Sabbath was different when your cow is stuck than when it’s safely in the stable, when your mother is sick than when she’s dancing around the room. Context mattered to him. It still does.

And it matters to us too. For a baseball pitcher to miss something by a mile reveals pretty poor quality; for a spacecraft landing on Mars, it’s remarkable precision. A kindergartner writing a story in complete sentences would be a celebrated achievement; a professional novelist, though, would be expected to do that as the bare minimum of his or her craft. The first sermon Tony preached was, by his current standards, a horrific jumble of incoherent thoughts and poor theology; by the standards of his country church and his age (15), the listeners deemed it a decent start toward a career in ministry.

Every judgment we make is a contextual judgment. Every standard we use presupposes some context for it to be meaningful. Missiologists have been trying to bring this truth to our attention for decades. Anthropologists have been challenging for centuries now many of our lifestyle assumptions by their observations of people in other cultural contexts who, often with great creativity and persistence, find other, even better ways to do things that we take for granted. We are not the standard.

Thus, Kairos is much like one of those strange foreign communities to the metaphorical anthropologists who observe us doing things differently than the way learning has often been done in the West. As noted earlier, one of our distinctives is our bold, delighted use of context in how we define and evaluate learning. While we use a master assessment rubric across programs, degrees, and continents, the standards by which we assess the proficiency of our students must be informed by the context of the student. Excellent leadership for a pastor in Pakistan who fears for the lives of his congregation members is drastically different from a megachurch pastor in California or a house church leader in urban Houston. And so it should!

That's why Kairos is more than just an institution of higher learning. We're sometimes closer in spirit to a global missions movement. The journey of discipleship looks distinctively different across this "community of communities" even though we agree together to consistently, passionately trust in one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Father, who is above all, through all, and in us all. The Spirit defines the excellence we seek in all our contexts. All of them.

Spirit-led excellence is not only contextualized from place to place but also from one time to another. Next week, we'll look at how standards change over time, and why they need to.

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## STANDARDS CHANGE

"They're grrrrreat!" That enthusiastic endorsement by an animated tiger is what Kellogg's Foods, perhaps counter-intuitively, concluded would sell kids and parents on a particular breakfast cereal. It must have worked! The "Frosted Flakes" brand has sold briskly in the US for over 70 years now. (The Latin American name for the cereal, "Zucaritas," means "little sugary things," which is particularly delightful, and doubtless quite sellable.)

Absent a striped tiger, how do we know what's grrrrreat? That's what we're exploring in this series. We noted previously that standards of quality are defined differently from one context to another.

Getting the words "right" for a pastor means something different when conducting a funeral or other emotionally-charged, highly-memorable event than when extemporizing in a small group Bible study, for instance. Learning the difference between contexts, and what excellence invites in each, is part of the intangible wisdom we want learners in our own Kairos community to see in us and learn with us—which, of course, means that we must also be able to recontextualize excellence ourselves.

And standards of quality are also defined differently over time. Hearing it said so bluntly may trouble us at first. Perhaps we fear that quality standards in some things we care about have decreased over time. Or, conversely, perhaps we have the feeling that more is asked of us than of those who came before. In either scenario, we might easily be tempted to argue that quality standards need to be immutable over time, that our understanding of excellence must be a constant.

Yet that's not really workable, is it? Changes in culture, technology, and economics force us to adapt continually. To repair a car engine these days requires the ability to operate a computer, and the diagnostic software on it, instead of merely grabbing a toolbox and looking under the engine, as a skilled mechanic was

once able to do (successfully!). To treat a patient requires up-to-date knowledge of medical research and advances, instead of simply prescribing what was once conventional wisdom (such as David's story about his boyhood doctor suggesting cigarettes as an aid for asthma!). And to be a competent student now requires one to know how to find relevant, trustworthy information in an era awash in unsupported assertions and half-truths, rather than being content with mastering the five hard-copy books available on a given topic at the local library, as was once the case.

This is why leadership theorist Peter Senge coined the phrase "learning organization." He wasn't speaking of educational institutions per se—although, ironically, those organizations that help others learn have historically been among the most impervious to learning new ways themselves. He was comparing the qualities that had been previously admired in 20th-century organizations—stability, size, and structure—with those characteristics that he (quite accurately) predicted would be necessary for 21st-century organizations—agility, nimbleness, and flatness. Those of the previous century were no less committed to excellence than their successors now but how such quality is defined had shifted.

Jim Collins became well known early in this century with his study of some selected organizations that he believed made a courageous leap from merely good to being truly awesome. Some churches aspired to do the same, following his advice. His resultant book, *Good to Great*, was published just four weeks after 9/11, when the smoke from the rubble of the Twin Towers was still hovering over the Manhattan skyline. He discovered, to his dismay, that most of his "great" companies were not able to well navigate the massive economic and cultural changes that resulted from that cataclysmic event. Others that he had not regarded so highly, did. "Great," as it turned out, was a highly variable measure.

This changeability of how we discern greatness is core to the model of learning into which the Spirit of God has led us in Kairos. At one point in time, excellence in education was defined by inputs—the papered credentials of the faculty, the pain inflicted by a rigorous curriculum, the facilities of a campus, the utilities of a classroom, and the abilities of a student. There was some value in those things, of course. But there was another time in history when quality was measured by the reputation of an itinerant, perhaps even illiterate, rabbi. Inquisitive minds and restless spirits would follow such people, sit at their feet to listen and learn and be changed by that experience. Jesus was one of those itinerants. What would have happened if Jesus had confined his ministry to tuition-paying, degree-seeking students in classrooms with four walls?

Thus, in this generation, Kairos University is being led by the Spirit to break out of those walls, to break through those old assumptions, and to break down barriers that have kept countless people from experiencing the depth and breadth of a Christ-focused discipleship journey. It's not "less than" what was before; we might even suggest that it's "more than." And that "more than" quality is not primarily attributable to the quality of being and doing that each of us brings to this community of communities (although that matters too), but to the God whose Spirit

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## EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY

Do you know the children’s game “Simon Says”? One child at time is permitted to command others to do silly things—like pat their heads and rub their tummies at the same time—but only as long as the leader uses the words “Simon says.” If “Simon” doesn’t say so, the words of the leader have no authority. But who’s Simon? Who is the person whose name invokes so much authority that the rest of us have to do whatever he tells us to do? One of the theories is that a Roman game roughly translated as “Cicero Says” was renamed centuries later after Simon de Montfort, an English nobleman who was so powerful that he could order kings around. Sort of makes sense, doesn’t it?

We’ve been exploring in this series what is meant by Spirit-led excellence, including how, why, and by whom quality standards are defined. There was once a time when most of those decisions were made by a few people in positions of authority. If Simon said it, that settled the issue. But noblemen and kings rarely make such decisions anymore. Last weekend a crown was placed on the head of a new king of Great Britain, but no one expects Charles III to be an autocratic ruler. Others now decide what is excellent governance in his nation.

And who decides what constitutes excellence in our own community? We do. The community does. And who is the community? It’s larger than just those of us who work for Kairos, and even broader than the “community of communities” that we previously defined Kairos to be. The end users—those who are the recipients of and participants in what we do also influence our understanding of excellence. Patients and clients get a voice in how they are treated. Government agencies help codify and police the standards of professionals in their jurisdictions. The public at large speaks into the creation of professional standards that matter to them.

Having acknowledged these other voices in the process it is nonetheless those who excel in a craft or profession who bear the greatest burden of maintaining their own standards and those of their peers.

Quality standards emerge from “communities of practice” comprised of people who both created and are governed by the standards of their professional practice. In other words, our standards of excellence are, to some degree, determined by others in our field. Think about it this way: Who is it that sets the standards for good medicine? Doctors do. Doctors determine what medical care leads to health and which doesn’t. Then they are held accountable to those standards in the care they provide. Who is it that sets the standards for being a good lawyer? Lawyers do. Who is it that sets the standards for good therapy? Therapists do. This is why peer-review is so important in nearly any profession.

These practitioners are willing to do this work of quality control because they know that their standards are not arbitrary. They are arrived at by reason with rigor and care, with much conversation over a long period of time, with a fair amount of trial-and-error, with wisdom gained from having seen or felt the pain of failure. They are willing to do so because the people they serve matter. Standards keep our eyes on what we are about, what we’re trying to achieve, and who we’re impacting.



Practices are best when they are aspirational, not just legalistic. That is, when they are moving toward an end or a goal, when they're persistently, consistently trying to make things better. It is only when we know what we are trying to do, and why we are trying to do it, that we can assess whether or not we are, in fact, doing it, much less doing it well. Thus, recognizing what we are trying to do is essential in developing the appropriate standards of excellence for hitting our target, for achieving our outcomes.

It's enlightening, sometimes even amusing, to watch the intense dedication of any community of practitioners to their chosen standards. Gamers can spend hours perfecting their craft so they can excel in competition with others online. Musicians will rehearse and rehearse, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, so that a public performance achieves the perfection expected by the band members. A committed gardener will endeavor each year to grow a crop even better than that of last year, something worthy of showing off at the fair or market.

We're like them in our own endeavors. We exhibit the same passion, the same diligence in the things we care about. And it's not because Simon says, or even, perhaps, because God says. Does that surprise you? Yes, there are Scripture passages that encourage, even admonish us, to do things well for the glory of God (e.g., I Corinthians 10:31). But those who are led by the Spirit do not need a command to do things well; their love for what they do already do and the people for whom they do it—this is what motivates them toward excellence. Their inherent passion is what makes them wonder what excellence in their field, in their community, should consist of. And that's the topic we'll take up next!

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## NEVER CONTENT WITH CONTENT

Have you ever regretted buying something that said "some assembly required?" Several years ago, Tony made an online purchase of a stationary exercise bike. It was a good deal. It seemed easy enough. Until the day that a couple of cardboard boxes arrived on his doorstep, with literally hundreds of small parts inside. "Okay, this is going to take a bit longer than I thought, but at least there's an instruction guide for assembly!" Well, as it turned out, the instruction guide was a collection of photocopied pages, translated poorly into English from another language, with drawings that did not quite match the model of bike he had purchased. There were no YouTube videos to help with assembly either?

What do you do when you don't have usable content for learning? In this case, all that was left was experimentation. Tony looked at the picture of the bike on the box and started putting pieces together, large ones first and then smaller ones, seeing what fit where and what didn't, hoping that the finished product at the end of the day would look and function like the bike he had purchased. It did! To this day, the electronic monitor is still not operational, but the bike works! But it required Tony to learn the assembly process

differently than he had anticipated. So much of learning is like this, isn't it?

We've been exploring the concept of Spirit-led excellence in this current series, including how excellence is to be understood, who gets to define it, and how it is upheld and even improved over time. Last week, we noted that the primary creators and owners of standards of quality are the communities of practitioners—that the people who actually do things are the ones most invested in making sure they're done well. And that is true, of course, for communities of learning, like Kairos.

But all communities of practice sometimes get lost. They inherit standards from the past and fail to update them, and the instruction guides become quickly out of date. Or they receive them from another context and miss the opportunity to translate them, so they fail to become relevant and appropriate to a new context. What's left in those situations is something not terribly useful in the end, like a half-assembled exercise bike that sits in a corner but doesn't work.

This is exactly what has happened in higher education. Many institutions have become content with content, choosing cognitive awareness or understanding over personal transformation. "Content" and "knowledge" are regarded as virtually synonymous in the language of the academy. Most institutions act under the assumption that the more content one gets, the more knowledgeable one is—and that such knowledge is the end of the process. The problem with this reductionist approach to knowledge is that it strips away other essential aspects of knowledge, particularly those that have far more potential to change us.

All three of us have led seminaries that had initially offered this content-driven model of learning. And we all eventually arrived at the startling realization that students taught with this model demonstrated little correlation between success in the classroom and success in ministry. We saw it in our alumni. We heard it from denominational leaders. We heard from parishioners. Sometimes, we even heard concern that the content we were teaching was actually detrimental to ministry.

What was most often identified as being missing was the positive impact of the education on the students' personal life, on their growth as disciples of Christ, on their emotional and relational maturity. We understand this from our own experience—how someone might have a cognitive grasp on the Bible, might even have a coherent Christology, but not know Jesus. A graduate might know how to preach about grace but not how to receive it, much less offer it. One could spout polysyllabic words but not know how to listen to hurting people. They have knowledge that puffs up but are lacking in the love that builds up.

How could that be? It was almost as if their instructional guide for ministry had been written in the wrong language! And, indeed, it was, and so the final, assembled product wasn't quite what was hoped for. We weren't the only ones to encounter this problem, of course. It was (and remains) common in higher education and in ministry. But what to do about it? A typical response was to simply add more content!... as if more of a less-helpful thing was what was most needed. No, we realized that a more holistic approach was needed—a model of learning that was not content with content, but that would seek to integrate content into character and craft as well.

And so, the Spirit led us, and you, to come together in this thing called Kairos, at this opportune time, to embody and flesh out a different approach to the learning journey, one that refuses to be content with content, one that aims for greater excellence.

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## MORE THAN

They were called Pietists (“pious ones”) by those who berated them. They began as a movement among German Lutherans in the late 1600s under the leadership of theologian Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705). In his seminal book, *Pia Desideria* (“Pious Desires”) Spener argued, among other things, that small group Bible studies, a novel idea at the time, were a wonderful way to help each other grow spiritually. He advocated for gentleness when in public arguments with fellow Christians or unbelievers, instead of the hostile denunciations common in that era (and our own).

And, more than anything, Spener insisted that “it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.” In other words, what he and other pietists were advocating was the holistic integration of head, heart, and hands; or, when applied to theological education, of content, character, and craft. We determined that we dare not be content with content; i.e. that however important our ideas, doctrines, and principles, they alone were not sufficient to be fully formed as a disciple of Christ. Yet this was the trap into which much of theological education had fallen; we had designed curriculum, learning activities, and degree programs to teach theological content to learners, even if they emerged still immature spiritually or ill-prepared to practice ministry effectively.

The effects of this off-balance over-emphasis on content were devastating. It was not just, as we recounted, that leaders of denominations and congregations were telling us too often that the people upon whom we had placed our academic imprimatur were not prepared for the roles entrusted to them. Sometimes, in fact, the student’s rejection of the content offered to them caused them to lose their personal faith; we’ve all heard the “slip of the tongue” that going to seminary was attending “cemetery.” Even that did not deter the trend; over time, the diploma on the wall and the academic credentials on a resume were the qualities sought after. These constituted the path to career success. And so, despite the warnings of Scripture, we who served in the academy or led in the church often aspired to be called “master” and “doctor,” so we could lord it over those who were not so titled. The whole enterprise had turned upside-down from the way that Jesus had disciplined his own followers.

Fortunately, we began to wake up from this travesty. Slowly, over the past generation or so, theological educators began paying attention to the integration of what was being learned in class with the life of the student. But the methods of doing so, still predominant in much of education, were not well integrated.

Sometimes we blithely added classes in spiritual formation, under the hopeful assumption that mere content on being formed as disciples would somehow miraculously result in the actual formation of learners. And then we added content on practice and called it “practical theology,” giving lie to the inherent assumption that the rest of our curriculum was not practical, nor intended to be.

When pushed to move students out of the classroom, at least on occasion, seminaries invented “field education” and “practica” and other such means to help students learn and practice ministry skills. And, indeed, many of these efforts were helpful—far more so than merely sitting in a classroom talking about practice. But they were still largely regarded as “add-ons”—things to be done only after the “important” content was learned, and then under the direction of the learned faculty far more often than that of the experienced practitioner. As good as all these adjustments were, they simply did not help enough.

Content was not enough. Adds-on were not enough. A re-imagining of the educational journey was needed. And that’s why Kairos exists. We reject the reductionism of the old model and instead embrace a holistic understanding of knowing that utilizes all three dimensions, much like the Pietists did 350 years ago. Nor do we believe that these three components of content, character, and craft are separate from each other. Rather, they are inextricably woven together. Every Spirit-led life event, conversation, book, class lesson, theological musing, Spirit-filled experience, or act of service is an opportunity to learn content, character, and craft, all at the same time, for this is how we, as humans, have been created. We don’t do life in silos, and neither should we attempt learning that way either. This is why we measure proficiency in all three aspects for every single learning outcome in every single Kairos program. They are the for the Spirit-led life the electron, proton, and neutron that holds an atom together.

And content, character, and craft are our measures of excellence as well. This is why we have suggested that our standards of quality, albeit startlingly different from many others in higher education, are not less-than, but actually more-than. We are not offering lower quality, but actually a greater aspiration worthy of those who would follow Jesus. And when this kind of intentional, holistic integration occurs, under the direction of the Spirit, incredible things tend to happen. The pietistic movement that began with Spener expanded far beyond its Lutheran origins, and infected the Moravians, created the Methodists, permeated the Reformed churches, found a foothold in Catholicism, influenced the Quakers, launched the Brethren groups, and sparked the “awakening” revivals of the 18th century. May the Spirit continue to guide us, for the glory of God in this generation.

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## GOOD

Excellence is never easy. A dictum Tony picked up 40 years ago, when he was just beginning his experience as a leader, was that “the greatest hindrance to the best is the good.” Think about that for a moment. We’re tempted to believe that we are choosing most often between good and bad options, but those choices are actually relatively easy—at least easy to discern, even if requiring some courage to implement. This is why people are much more likely to change if they’re feeling miserable or, as the leadership literature sometimes puts it, if there is a “burning platform.” These are moments when we vigorously define our current situation as “bad” and long for positive change, and for leadership that can help us get there. We are far more likely to hearken to the Spirit’s call in such moments.

But choices between good and best are much, much harder. We can easily settle for the merely good—something passable, something that will get by. This is at the root of mission drift—it’s easy to become a good community that does good things, albeit nothing that is distinct from other good people are also doing all around us. We will rarely be criticized for choosing the good, and often be affirmed for it. But the problem is that no organization, no community, and no person can choose to all the good things available to them; we don’t have the resources of time, money, and energy to do all the good that’s possible. Sooner or later, we have to choose between what’s merely “good” and what’s truly “best.”

And this is often the hardest decision we have to make. It requires a fair amount of desire and courage, for the pay-off of “best” is not quickly or easily recognized. People wonder why we “have to make everything so hard,” why we continue to push for a deeper experience, a higher quality, a more transformative outcome. How do we possibly make such a choice? By learning and leaning into our identity, our calling, our mission—the one thing above all else that we have been invited by God to become, and then live out in the world. This is what excellence looks like. One never “settles” for excellence. One aspires to it, and then strives for it, and rejoices in it when fully experienced.

What does this mean for us who are walking on the Kairos journey? Here’s one implication: one of the most attractive deceptions of a scholar is to believe we can think ourselves into a new way of living, that we can settle for content (a good thing) as a hoped-for means of transformation (the best thing). Rather, as spiritual teacher Richard Rohr reminds us, we must actually live ourselves into a new way of thinking. We suspect that’s really what Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Romans about “being transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2). The word “metanoia” (renewing) there is not addressing cognition, as if we could be transformed by getting our ideas right; it’s about a new perspective, a new way of seeing things, including ourselves and God.

And perhaps this was what Jesus was alluding to when he told his skeptics, “What I teach comes from the One who sent me. Anyone who wants to do his will can test this teaching and know whether it’s from God or whether I’m making it up” (John 7:17, MSG). In other words, he’s saying, don’t just argue about ideas. Try it. Do

it. And the experience itself will show you whether it's from God or not, whether it's best or merely good, whether it's led by the Spirit or motivated by something else.

Isn't this exactly what Jesus invited his first disciples into? He didn't sit down with Peter and Andrew over a beer and try to talk them into his perspective on the kingdom of God. Instead, he walked by and said, "Follow me!" And they left their nets behind to experience the kingdom of God for themselves. Along the way, of course, Jesus taught them; he explained to them what they were seeing and hearing. And he never once held back from the truest, fullest, best implications of the Gospel, no matter what it cost him. God aspired for more for this people than they had ever imagined.

And this is the same kind of advice we who mentor students in Kairos offer on a near-daily basis: "Don't try to think yourself into a new way of living. Try doing it. Practice. Experiment. And then you'll discover whether it's good or not, whether it's best or not. Then come back and let's discern together, not just what you have learned, but how you have changed as a result. And then we'll do it again!" It is this iterative process, continually initiated and motivated by the Spirit, that we've been exploring.. It is this process that creates the excellence we seek.

The best is yet to come, and the best is worth it, always worth it, because it reflects the quality of the excellent God who gave us his own best, so that we can live life abundantly—so that we and everyone on this being-redeemed earth can flourish in his goodness, in his "best-ness." That's his end game, that's his hope and vision and promise for us. Let's never settle for anything less.

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