

Kelly A. Myers

Metanoic Movement: The Transformative Power of Regret

The concept of *metanoia* illuminates the spaces that exist around and beyond opportune moments. As such, *metanoia* offers ways to reframe the affective elements of teaching and learning, writing and revising. This essay examines emotion, agency, and transformation in the concept of *metanoia* as a way to expand “opportunity” in writing processes.

I have been to the Grand Canyon twice, but I have only seen it once. In fact, I stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon two different times, but I only saw it once. Come to find out, it is possible for the entire canyon, every grand inch, to fill up with fog—a fog so thick that a person can stand on an outcropping at the jagged edge of a natural phenomenon and see nothing but solid, bright gray. As I stood there, I knew that my feet should feel tingly, the way they always do when I’m on the edge of something, but they didn’t. So I stood and stared into gray light, surrounded by a quiet that I will never forget. It’s a strange and stirring feeling to witness a natural wonder firsthand, but I think it is even stranger, and maybe even more stirring, to brush by one.

Years later, it happened again. I traveled from Tucson, Arizona, to Niagara, New York, spent three days there, and never got to see the falls. The entire town stood still, wrapped in the silence of heavy snowfall, but everywhere I

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went the sound of rushing water echoed in my ears. During my visit I learned that Niagara Falls provides power for states all the way down to Georgia, it is divided evenly between two countries, and every year an unpublicized number of people soar over the edge—sometimes intentionally and other times not. I expected the Niagara River to move with a frighteningly quick current, but it was deceptively calm. I watched large chunks of ice glide lazily across a white/gray surface, contradicting the warning signs that line the shore. I learned about its history, watched its river flow by, slept in a bed two miles away, but I left the area without seeing the falls.

For years, I framed both of these experiences as missed opportunities—kairotic moments that I could not seize. I traveled all that way and did not get to see what I wanted to see, what I was *supposed to see*. I don't know if I will ever get back to Niagara Falls, and I still feel the sadness and longing of that missed opportunity. And yet, while the emotional experience of a missed moment may be more visible, I have come to realize that the experience of seeing and seizing a kairotic moment also contains loss. *Kairos* inevitably sharpens our attention and narrows our view, limiting what we see and value. In moments when the kairotic opportunity cannot be seen or seized, a new view opens up, creating the opportunity to consider a different range of possibilities. In these moments, we have the opportunity to experience *metanoia*.

As the partner of *kairos*, *metanoia* represents the “or else” element of the story: *seize opportunity or else*.¹ The allegorical story is a familiar one: when Opportunity appears, a person has that one moment—*kairos*—to seize the god by the hair. Any hesitation and Opportunity vanishes, the back of his head bald and ungraspable. Those who do not embrace *Kairos* reside with *Metanoia*. On the surface, the story creates a strict and foreboding distinction between the opportune versus inopportune or seized versus missed moments. The story frames missed opportunities as negative, something that we must strive to avoid, thus asserting pressure on *kairos* as the pinnacle of achievement and success. Looking more closely at *metanoia*'s role, however, invites ways to revise and expand the story and experience of opportunity.

The process of *metanoia* begins with what feels like a missed opportunity, but if the person remains suspended in regret, then *metanoia* has not yet occurred. Regret and disappointment are elements of *metanoia*, but they do not represent the entirety of the experience. These feelings serve as a starting point or catalyst in the larger experience of *metanoia*. When framed as partner concepts, *kairos* and *metanoia* broaden opportunity beyond a single moment,

reshaping the experience of opportunity into a longer process that unfolds over time. If *kairos* represents key moments, openings, and turning points, then *metanoia* provides a way to envision the experiences that exist outside and around those moments of opportunity. When viewed together, these concepts enable us to navigate a wider landscape of opportunity.

As teachers and writers, we constantly encounter *metanoia* in our work, but we rarely label it as such. Naming *metanoia* and recognizing the concept as a key element of opportunity offers new paths into the emotional and transformational dimensions of teaching and learning, writing and revising. As an approach to writing, metanoic revision involves actively turning toward “missed opportunities” with the goal of seeing and creating new ways to navigate content, context, opportunity, and time. While turning toward missed opportunities can spark new insight, it also stirs feelings of regret, disappointment, and fear—a complicated and challenging endeavor for both teachers and students, and one that cannot be taken lightly. A metanoic revision process, then, must begin with a reimagining of regret. Instead of a stagnant and oppressive force, *metanoia* helps us to reframe regret as an entry point that can lead to reorientation on both intellectual and emotional levels.

To develop the concept of metanoic revision, I begin by examining the movement between regret and transformation in the experience of *metanoia*. To provide an illustration of metanoic movement, particularly in educational contexts, I analyze *Metanoia*'s role in the allegorical *Tablet of Cebes*. In the allegory the figure *Metanoia*, positioned between unhappiness and the gateway to a new level of education, offers the traveler an opportunity to embrace new insight. After exploring the broader theoretical dimensions of *metanoia*, I describe the roles of agency and emotion, as well as reflection and reorientation, in a *metanoia*-based approach to writing. Metanoic revision, I argue, offers writers a wider range of “openings,” acknowledging the ways in which opportunity constantly changes shape in the lived experience of writing and revision.

Regret and/as Transformation

By actively embracing what may feel like a mistake or missed moment, we can learn to see and seize the potential for transformation that exists within experiences of regret. Though the active state of metanoic transformation may seem

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incompatible with the seemingly passive state of regret, discussions of *metanoia* must begin by linking regret and transformation. As Foucault explains, “*metanoia* is penitence *and* it is a radical change of thought and mind” (211, emphasis added). Additionally, Guy Nave Jr. describes *metanoia* as “an intellectual change of mind *as well as* an emotional sense of regret and remorse” (59, emphasis added). In this section, I draw on Richard Benjamin Crosby’s work with *kairos* to describe the overall trajectory of *metanoia* experiences—a trajectory that persists throughout the history of the concept. This section brings to life the movement(s) of *metanoia* to create a historical and theoretical foundation for the metanoic revision process.

To envision the ways in which regret serves as a catalyst for transformation in *metanoia*, we need to first examine the distinction between the terms *metanoia* and *metameleia* (remorse). Both concepts involve feelings of sorrow that lead to a change of mind, but in the experience of *metameleia* a person reflects on a poor or painful decision but remains in that state, holding onto the emotional weight. In *metanoia*, however, a person reflects back on a mistake, feels the emotional pain, and then moves forward with a changed mind. *Metanoia* involves reorientation, often spurred, but not consumed, by remorse. Laurel Fulkerson distinguishes between *metanoia/metanoēō* and *metameleia*, stating, “*metanoēō* is a more serious reconsideration (especially where there is some harm done), and *metameleia* is a result of *metanoēō*, specifically the realization, upon reconsideration, that one has made a serious mistake and that it cannot be fixed” (256).² As Fulkerson’s description indicates, *metanoia* involves seeing something anew and moving in a new direction, but when there is no possibility for movement, then *metameleia* occurs.

When it comes to the lived experience of *metanoia*, the larger regret-reorientation movement can be broken down into three phases. The framework for envisioning these phases takes us back to the *kairos* and *metanoia* partnership. In “*Kairos* as God’s Time in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Last Sunday Sermon,” Richard Benjamin Crosby presents a “kairoic conception of time” that unfolds in a “three-step pattern of movement, loosely identified . . . as pause, recognition, and action” (261). Crosby describes the “pause” as a transformative space: “within the time(lessness) and space of a pause . . . one ‘sees’ (i.e., realizes) the exigence of a given situation” (273). Crosby connects “the notion of pause” to “the realization of opportunity,” new understanding, and action (269). The “pause” thus represents an opening through which new movement and action can be achieved—“to pause is not to sleep, but to wake” (270). Given the connection between *kairos* and *metanoia*, the “pause” that Crosby describes

offers a way to envision the entrance into a metanoic experience. In *metanoia*, the “pause” is initially experienced as a missed opportunity or mistake, but that missed opportunity becomes an opening into a larger process of learning.

Crosby’s description of the “pause, recognition, and action” trajectory provides a helpful starting point in understanding the lived experience of *metanoia*. To align with *metanoia*, though, the

“recognition” experience must involve reflection: looking back in order to see something in a new way. The missed opportunity creates a pause, thus opening or creating a space for a new kind of reflection and action. The “action”

phase of the *metanoia* experience often manifests as redirection or reorientation in thinking and feeling. Therefore, we can imagine *metanoia* unfolding as a recursive process that begins with a pause (opening) and then transitions into a process of reflection and reorientation. Such a framework provides a way to envision the lived experience of *metanoia*, but in order to be true to the fluidity of the concept the phases must be approached contextually and not applied as a set formula.

For example, in the context of classical and Hellenistic Greek literature, *metanoia* often represents a “change of mind.” Nave points to this “change of mind” in the work of Xenophon: “But when we reflected that there was one Cyrus, the Persian, who reduced to obedience a vast number of men and cities and nations, we were compelled to change our opinion (μετανοεῖν) and decide that to rule men might be a task neither impossible nor even difficult, if one should only go about it in an intelligent manner” (qtd. in Nave 42). This example demonstrates a moment of pause in which reflection leads to new action (“But when we reflected . . . we were compelled to change our opinion and decide”), but the author does not explicitly acknowledge the emotional dimension of the experience.³ In the *History of the Peloponnesian War* (3.36), though, Thucydides points to a metanoic moment in the Mytilenean revolt: “But the next day they felt a kind of repentance [*metanoia*] in themselves and began to consider what a great and cruel decree it was that not the authors only but the whole city should be destroyed” (Crane; Foucault 215; Nave 52).⁴ Here, the experience explicitly begins with emotion; more specifically, the opening/pause is created by the emotional experience (“they felt a kind of repentance . . . and began to consider”). In both examples, *metanoia* represents the action of pausing, looking back, and then moving forward in a new way.

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Emotion plays a different, and much more prominent, role in the context of Christian *metanoia* where metanoic movement culminates in an experience of spiritual conversion. To describe the overall experience of Christian *metanoia* (as developed in the third and fourth centuries), Foucault identifies three phases that resonate with the pause, recognition/reflection, and reorientation trajectory. First, metanoic conversion manifests in “a single, sudden, both historical and metahistorical event which dramatically changes and transforms the subject’s mode of being at a single stroke” (211). Along with the sudden change, Christian *metanoia* involves a “transition,” which Foucault describes as “a transition from one type of being to another, from life to death, from mortality to immortality, from darkness to light, from the reign of the devil to that of God, etcetera” (211). Finally, in order for both the sudden change and the transition to take effect, there must be a “break” in the subject, breaking from the previous self “in its being, its modes of being, in its habits or its *ethos*” (211). Foucault, drawing on Pierre Hadot’s distinction between *epistrophē* and *metanoia*, emphasizes that the “break” in Christian *metanoia* represents rebirth and reorientation rather than recollection or return.

The Christian *metanoia* experience must, however, be understood in connection with repentance and penitence. With the translation of the Bible into Latin, *metanoia* becomes *paenitentia*, a word that brings penalty for sin and sorrow for wrongdoing into the experience. Whereas the root *meta* points to movement after, above, or beyond, the root *poena* signifies punishment, pain, and penalty. Jouni Tilli elaborates on the point, noting, “In Roman usage the term *poena* came to be associated with a court of law and the language of judgment. *Poenitentia*, referring to the pain of one who suffered the penalty for his misdeeds, was not a legal term. Rather, it referred to the feeling of sorrow or regret which followed a mistake” (47). When personified in artwork, the figure of *Metanoia* is often labeled “*Paenitentia*” and portrayed in a quiet state of regret and lamentation. The translation of *metanoia* into *paenitentia* brings a punitive element to the concept; a person must pause and reflect upon past sins, repenting for those past actions in order to experience metanoic conversion.

Thus far, the examples have addressed individual experience, pointing to an internal process of learning and growth in the concept of *metanoia*. Importantly, *metanoia* also functions as a rhetorical figure, bringing audience into the metanoic experience. In a rhetorical context, *metanoia* (also *correctio*) involves amplification, or, as Richard A. Lanham explains, the “qualification of

a statement by recalling it and expressing it in a better way, often by using a negative” (100). Yet, with the influence of Christian *metanoia* on the rhetorical figure, this act of recalling and revising a statement involves penitence. Adam Ellwanger finds evidence of this trend in both George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1590) and Henry Peacham’s *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593). Puttenham, in fact, labels the rhetorical figure: “Metanoia, or the Penitent.” In Puttenham’s description, the rhetorical figure *metanoia* involves not only amending a statement but also feeling sorry for the mistake and repenting. As Jeanne Fahnestock points out, Puttenham inserts an apology into *metanoia/correctio*, recommending “the speaker apologize for an incorrect word choice and take it back before replacing it” (140). For Peacham, *metanoia* involves both repentance and self-blame (Ellwanger 311). To enact *metanoia* rhetorically, a rhetor embodies remorse and repentance as a way to illustrate or create a transformation for or in an audience. The mistake creates a “pause” that offers a new way of thinking and feeling—“the realization of opportunity” that Crosby describes; however, in this context the realization is shaped for and experienced by an audience.

Embracing the movement within *metanoia* requires that we recognize regret and repentance as active states necessary to the overall experience, but repentance can overshadow the transformative dimensions of *metanoia*. For example, Matthew Arnold objects to the translation of *metanoia* as “repentance,” stating that the “main part was something far more active and fruitful—the setting up an immense new inward movement for obtaining one’s rule of life. And ‘metanoia,’ accordingly, is: A change of the inner man” (178). More recently, Priscilla Perkins writes, “[W]herever the term [*metanoia*] or its cognates appear in the Greek New Testament, English translators have replaced it with ‘repentance,’ a word that implies a remorseful turn away from disobedience, rather than an active embrace of unfamiliar possibilities” (“Radical” 597). These authors warn us that repentance and regret cannot dominate the concept of *metanoia*. Therefore, as a foundation for the process of metanoic revision, I propose that we combine all of these important elements—action, movement, repentance, and remorse—in order to frame *metanoia* as *an active embrace of the remorseful turn*.

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Visualizing the Pathways of Metanoic Learning

To envision the pause-reflection-reorientation movement within the concept of *metanoia*, and to apply that movement to an educational context, I turn to *Metanoia's* role in the *Tablet of Cebes*.⁵ In the allegory, the figure of *Metanoia* inhabits a key space in the long and winding journey toward “true education.” According to the story, the figure of *Metanoia* is positioned in the middle of the journey, surrounded by challenges and temptations that constantly threaten to derail the traveler. *Metanoia* intervenes at a critical point to provide new ways of thinking and feeling, thus opening the gate to another realm of learning. The *Tablet of Cebes* provides a visual for the larger pathways of metanoic learning: processes of reflection and reorientation that extend over time. The story of this long journey, with its many layers and turning points, offers a way to begin imagining *metanoia's* role in writing and revising.

A story within a story, the *Tablet of Cebes* begins with a group of strangers encountering a painted tablet while “strolling around the temple of Cronus” (Seddon 185). As they debate the meaning of the tablet, an old man approaches and offers to tell them the story of the tablet. The man proceeds to describe each element of the allegory in detail, beginning with the three concentric circles/enclosures that represent distinct phases of life and levels of knowledge. Travelers must brave a treacherous journey, navigating complicated pathways through the three levels in order to reach “true education.” However, the odds are set against the traveler from the beginning. At the first enclosure a figure described as Genius or Daimon stands at the entrance, greeting the crowd with a list of instructions for the journey; once a traveler passes through the first gate, the instructions are immediately forgotten as Deceit provides drinks of Ignorance and Error. From that point on, impaired by deceit, the traveler faces a series of choices that provide opportunities to move out of deception and back onto the path of true education and happiness (*eudaimonia*).

The first level of education bustles with temptation, populated by Opinions, Desires, Pleasures, and the wily figure of Fortune, who rolls madly around the enclosure on a round stone, giving and taking gifts at random. In this first enclosure, many travelers chase Fortune and fall victim to the Vices. Once on the path of the Vices, travelers enter into Luxury, until they become slaves to the Vices and are thus handed over to Punishment. At this point, the path leads to the figures of Retribution, Sorrow, Anguish, Lament, and Despair, leaving the traveler tortured and imprisoned in the House of Unhappiness. Suspended in unhappiness, the traveler is stuck in a state of remorse, the journey toward education stalled. At this point, the figure *Metanoia* enters to play a vital role.

Metanoia's position between the House of Unhappiness and the gate to the second level of education provides a visual for understanding the balance of regret and transformative insight within the concept of *metanoia*. Without *Metanoia*, travelers remain forever trapped, unable to advance into the higher levels of education and happiness. As John T. Fitzgerald and L. Michael White explain, "A way of escape is opened by encountering *Metanoia*" (9). But *Metanoia* does not simply grant the traveler a solution. Instead, "she releases him from his misery and introduces him to another Opinion and Desire, who lead him to True Education, but at the same time also introduces him to yet others who lead to False Education" (189). Thus, *Metanoia's* actions involve releasing the traveler from imprisonment and introducing new ideas, but she does not steer the traveler or provide a set direction. Fitzgerald and White describe her role in terms of reorientation: "Repentance [*Metanoia*] reorients the traveler by introducing him to new Opinions which in turn lead him either to true Paideia or Pseudopaideia" (9).⁶ *Metanoia* provides new information and insight, but the individual must decide what to do with that information. Ultimately, travelers meet *Metanoia* at a crossroads that could—if they embrace *metanoia*—be a critical turning point in their educational journey. In presenting new opinions and desires, *Metanoia* provides an opportunity for intellectual and emotional conversion. B. Diane Lipsett describes *Metanoia's* role in the *Tablet* as "life enhancing and liberating, providing a release from ills and a path to true *paideia*" (12). The encounter with *Metanoia*, she claims, is "the key to Life" (25). The *Tablet of Cebes* positions *Metanoia* as a guide who operates at the edge of lamentation, offering opportunities for insight and the possibility of new pathways.

Though the *Tablet of Cebes* is a Hellenistic, moralizing allegory, the story provides a way to envision *metanoia* as a key to writing and learning, especially in difficult and emotionally charged situations. The encounter with *Metanoia* occurs in the middle of the journey, surrounded by experiences of struggle and feelings of remorse. While *metanoia* offers a crucial pause and turning point in the journey, this experience is not the final destination in the story. The figure of *Metanoia* creates the possibility for release and reorientation by offering new ways of thinking and feeling; importantly, though, the traveler must make the decisions and take action, placing agency with the traveler and positioning *metanoia* (like opportunity) as something that can be seized. In other words, *Metanoia's* role in the allegory depicts the "active embrace of the remorseful turn" as an important aspect of learning, a way to enter new realms of knowledge.

As writing teachers, we know that there are long—even life-long—paths of learning that unfold through writing, with many metanoic encounters along the way. By situating *Metanoia* as part of a much longer journey with paths

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that extend both backward and forward, the *Tablet of Cebes* provides another layer for theorizing metanoic revision: *metanoia* is always part of a longer learning process that involves looking back in order to move forward in new ways. When applied to writing, the “journey” includes past, present, and future drafts—pausing to look at past and present drafts in order to create new

movement (reorientation, redirection) in writing and thinking. As we consider the pedagogical potential within *metanoia*, we must focus on the moments where students turn toward new insight or open themselves to new ideas, but we must also take into consideration the longer pathways and larger stories that surround those turning point moments.

Opportunity, Agency, and Emotion in Metanoic Revision

To begin shaping the connection between *metanoia* and writers and writing, we must return once again to the role of *kairos* in the experience and action of *metanoia*. As discussed earlier, if *kairos* represents key moments and turning points, then *metanoia* provides a way to envision the experiences that exist around those opportune moments.⁷ *Kairos* can be imagined as an opening in a larger tapestry—looking around and beyond the opening reveals the larger fabric of *metanoia*.⁸ *Metanoia*, then, represents the reflection, emotion, and insight that help us see how and why opportunities open and help us better seize opportunity in the future. Importantly, though, *metanoia* does not simply serve *kairos*. The two concepts work in tandem, two sides of the same coin: just as *metanoia* can illuminate kairotic moments, *kairos* can represent the moment of action or the decision that makes *metanoia* visible. In other words, the transformation of thinking and feeling that occurs through *metanoia* becomes visible when actions are taken that demonstrate the transformation.

If *kairos* represents the turning point or opening that offers a new direction, then *metanoia* is the internal *turning* that makes movement down that new path possible. Seized and missed moments can thus hold equal weight, as both are necessary for creating change (externally and internally). The pressure

of seizing *kairos* and the dread of meeting *metanoia* merge into a generative, dialectical exchange that unfolds over time and creates new movement. In the *kairos* and *metanoia* partnership, the boundaries of opportunity blur, and the distinction between opportune and inopportune moments dissolves, transforming a missed moment into a new form of opportunity.

If opportunity exists in moments seized and missed, then agency changes shape. As Marilyn M. Cooper describes in “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” agency can be imagined as an “on-going process of becoming,” one that is informed by internal and external, conscious and nonconscious factors. Cooper provides an example of the longer process of agency when she analyzes Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech, delivered in Philadelphia during his 2008 presidential campaign. Cooper expands the *kairos* of the speech by pointing to the “larger narrative” that exists around the moment:

[Obama’s] choice of how to respond this time, to articulate what he believed and wanted to say about race at this moment, could, like his earlier choice, be traced to a “larger narrative,” one he had been living and reflecting on and writing for many years. Like all responses, it emerged from the ongoing process of his becoming the person he is, as he responded to the world he encountered and the history he studied and as neural populations interacted within the complex system of his brain, creating emotions, intentions, moods, dispositions, meanings, memories, goals, and narratives. (426)

In this example, Cooper encourages readers to look around a kairotic moment, or to look through a kairotic moment as a window into a larger narrative and process. Agency is not just linked to Obama’s response in the moment; instead, Cooper connects agency to the living, reflecting, and writing that unfolds over many years. When agency expands to include the living and learning around *kairos*, then moments seized and missed form a fluid and on-going process of becoming—a process that includes reflection, exploration, and mistakes as elements of agency.

Shifting attention to the larger narrative of opportunity and the “on-going process of becoming” provides new ways for students to envision agency and opportunity in their writing. This larger process of revision takes us back to the pause-reflection-reorientation trajectory. In writing and revision, the transformative experience of *metanoia* begins with a moment of pause—the moment when a student begins to break, even slightly, from a previous belief, action, style, or identity, thus opening an avenue for new movement in the writing. The pause can reveal an idea or connection that was not available earlier

in the process. In these moments, students might experience the discovery as an epiphany. Oftentimes, though, students default to the notion of “mistake,” and they tend to express regret or embarrassment (*I can't believe I used to . . . or how could I have . . . or why did I . . .*). Metanoic revision, from the beginning of the process, asks students to do the difficult work of turning toward such regret, reframing the emotion as an opening into new possibilities instead of a roadblock or obstacle in the process. From this initial opening, students are positioned to move into a more layered process of reflection and reorientation.

The concept of *metanoia* offers a way to reframe emotion as an opening; however, in that reframing, we must be careful not to automatically link emotion and agency. Relegating emotion to isolated personal experiences offers a far too limited perspective on the role and function of emotion. For example, in their collection, *A Way to Move: Rhetorics of Emotion and Composition Studies*, Dale Jacobs and Laura R. Micciche recognize the importance of individual emotion and action, but they stress the necessity of situating emotion in social, cultural, and political contexts. As Lynn Worsham explains in the afterword:

Ideology binds each individual to the social world through a complex and often contradictory affective life that too often remains, for the most part, just beyond the horizon of semantic availability, and its success depends on a mystification or misrecognition of this primary work. Ideology works to mystify emotion as purely a personal and private matter; it actively conceals the fact that emotions are prevailing forms of social life, that so-called personal life always takes shape in social and cultural terms. (162)

In the experience of *metanoia*, regret can mark an entry point into new learning; and yet, Worsham's work reminds us that the emotional experience itself provides an opportunity for new critical awareness. Guarding emotional experience as the unique property of the self masks the power dynamics that thrive through emotion: hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability that are engrained and upheld through our emotions and emotional understanding. As Micciche writes, “Tendencies to think of emotions as *only* personally experienced and felt are simply not adequate to describe how emotions take form and are coded as appropriate or inappropriate within communities” (*Doing Emotion* 7). In order to create disruption and change, we must bring critical awareness to the affective realm. With its connection to regret and repentance, metanoic revision offers opportunities to see and resee our emotional responses, inviting us to call into the question the stories we tell, or fail to tell, through or about our emotions.

More specifically, there are hidden narratives within experiences of regret that too often go unrecognized. While regret may serve as a catalyst for growth and change, it is also an emotion that keeps people under control. The fear of regret often stifles insubordinate action—particularly rebellious, unexpected, or unpopular action. When seen this way, regret suppresses what Alison Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions” (160). While some of these “outlaw emotions” are dangerous and destructive, others have the power to upset stereotypes and propel social change. Thus feelings of regret (or the fear of regret) can steer people away from embracing “outlaw emotions” when they surface. Regret can serve to keep people silent, locking a larger social issue into an isolated personal experience.⁹

Metanoic revision, specifically the act of turning toward emotion in writing, can help us to locate, examine, and even disrupt the underlying stories and cultural narratives that exist in emotion. The transformational aspect of *metanoia* unfolds over time, but the initial feelings of regret are rooted in a specific experience or trend. Therefore, looking critically at moments that prompt regret can reveal embedded stereotypes and norms. Regret often links to a sense of failed expectation, moments when behavior or action falls short of what *could* or *should* be done in particular situations. Yet those expectations—that rubric of acceptable versus unacceptable behavior—too often goes unquestioned. The concept of *metanoia*, especially when paired with *kairos*, offers pedagogical potential not only in reframing regret but also in drawing out the engrained expectations that trigger such emotion: expectations of what a successful student should look or act like, or the way the educational system should function, or the ways in which men and women should behave, and so on. Experiences of regret, when approached critically, can reveal the ways in which students “have been taught to name their affective lives” (Worsham, “Going Postal” 235). Therefore, the movement of metanoic revision and reflection must be directed inward and outward, revealing the ways in which we compose and are composed in any given moment.¹⁰

Uncharted Territory: *Metanoia* in the Classroom

In theory, the concept of *metanoia* reframes regret as a generative experience; in practice, however, asking students to talk about regret is messy and difficult work. When I introduce *metanoia* to students, the majority of them initially resist the role of regret in the concept. Students tend to love the idea of *kairos*, and they are excited about the prospect of rethinking missed moments, but—

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more often than not—they do not want to think or talk about regret. Some students get defensive, even a little resentful, when I ask them to reconsider regret as a meaningful, creative force. In one class discussion, the group pushed for another word to describe the emotional dimension of *metanoia*, and, interestingly, the majority of them felt more comfortable with the word *pain* than with *regret*. In another discussion, students were sharing very personal stories about the emotional aspects of their revision process, yet when I used the word *emotion* to describe what I was hearing, they all resisted the association. Because regret often links to deeply felt vulnerabilities, we cannot, ethically, require students to turn toward their regrets. Incorporating *metanoia* into the classroom must be invitational and discovery-based work with an emphasis on the movement of reflection and reorientation.

Existing theories of reflection and reorientation in composition scholarship provide a foundation for metanoic revision pedagogy. For example, the steps of pause, reflection, and reorientation in *metanoia* are recursive, with multiple pauses and openings that are subjective and always shifting with context. Seeking and seizing these openings requires what Nancy Welch refers to as “restlessness.” For Welch, “getting restless” involves acknowledging “familiar scripts repeated in my writing, recognizing their limits, and learning to revise” (6). In her vision of writing, “[R]evision begins with what exceeds, rather than fits into, social mirrors and preplanned narratives. It begins with cultivating a sense of restlessness whenever I say: Yes, I’m in the right position now” (31). This sense of restlessness hinges on a willingness to embrace disorientation. A *metanoia*-based approach asks students to reflect on their writing and thinking with a “restless” mind, searching for openings and opportunities (seized or missed) that might spark new understanding or more questions.

In order to navigate multiple layers of opportunity, the metanoic revision process calls for the interplay of reflection and reorientation—movement that calls to mind Donna Qualley’s description of “reflexive inquiry.” In *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*, a title that resonates with *metanoia*, Qualley describes the on-going process of reflexive inquiry as “the act of turning back to discover, examine, and critique one’s claims and assumptions in response to an encounter with another idea, text, person, or culture” (3). She distinguishes reflection as a “unidirectional thought process” and reflexive inquiry as “a bidirectional, contrastive response” (11–12). Reflexivity, she writes,

is the movement by which “reflection, critique, and perhaps, transformation” can occur. Qualley describes the opportunity that reflexivity creates when she writes, “It is only when I turn back and become reflexive myself that I come to realize the extent to which my ideas continue to be made and remade over time” (6). The concept of “reflexive inquiry” offers a way to describe the intellectual and emotional work that creates movement in metanoic revision processes.

As teachers, we must adopt practices of restlessness and reflexive inquiry when introducing *metanoia* into the classroom. Presenting students with a solidified theory of *metanoia* defeats the power and purpose of the concept; therefore, we must embrace restlessness and reflexive inquiry as a way to keep the concept *open*—allowing our understanding of the concept to be “made and remade over time.” *Metanoia*, like its partner concept *kairos*, constantly moves and changes meaning with context. Both *kairos* and *metanoia* can serve as tools for invention and reinvention, but the concepts themselves serve as sites for ongoing theoretical invention and reinvention.

Therefore, when I teach *metanoia*, I provide ingredients more than answers, inviting students into the work of theory building. For example, I created a *kairos* and *metanoia*-themed writing and rhetoric course where students researched the two concepts, crafted their own theories, and then incorporated their theories into an extended research project. In this class, one student applied the concept of *metanoia* to the surgical world, seeking to better understand the role of reflection and regret in the high-stakes learning processes of surgeons. Other topics included a rhetorical analysis of *kairos* and *metanoia* in the gay rights movement, the metanoic practices of innovative leaders (e.g., Steve Jobs), and *kairos* and the timing and release of neurotechnologies. In addition to the research project, each student wrote a final reflection describing the experience and larger implications of their theory-building work. I introduced the reflection essay with the research assignment, emphasizing the importance of reflection to the overall process and not just the final product.

In my advanced nonfiction workshop course, theory building paves the way for metanoic revision as a process and practice. At the beginning of the course, students theorize *kairos* via readings, class discussion, and an essay assignment in which they research around an event or innovation to better understand the *kairos* of that particular moment. Then, to expand the concept of opportunity, we layer on *metanoia*. Through readings, examples, and personal reflection, we build a shared understanding of *metanoia*.¹¹ In order to put these theories into practice, students then select a past draft (written for

another course) for their metanoic revision project. Each student shapes his or her own specific revision process, but I offer the following steps to provide guidance and structure: 1) select a past draft, 2) analyze the writing for patterns, 3) establish goals and commitments and share those goals with the group, 4) revise and workshop the piece, and 5) reflect on the process and complete a self-assessment.¹²

When conceptualized as “moments,” drafts can be envisioned within a larger process of learning that extends over days, months, and years (part of the “larger narrative” of their writing). . . . Past drafts become layers and turning points—with layers and turning points within them—all part of the longer story of the student’s writing, learning, and growth.¹³

The metanoic revision project asks students to engage in a process of returning, reentering a past draft with a restless and inquiry-based mindset. Framed by the concepts of *kairos* and *metanoia*, this approach recasts the past draft as a snapshot of a moment, a document that represents what students could see at that particular moment and, perhaps, what they were willing to risk in that assignment or situation. When conceptualized as “moments,”

drafts can be envisioned within a larger process of learning that extends over days, months, and years (part of the “larger narrative” of their writing). Reentering past writing in this way allows students to dig deeper into ideas, initiating a more vertical movement in their writing processes. Past drafts become layers and turning points—with layers and turning points within them—all part of the longer story of the student’s writing, learning, and growth.¹³

The more vertical feel to a metanoic revision process comes from navigating multiple rhetorical situations within one piece of writing, inviting students to go deeper into both the content and the context of the piece. When students return to a past draft with *metanoia* as their lens, they are negotiating at least two distinct rhetorical situations. In the most immediate situation, they are revising a past draft; however, the metanoic revision process also involves returning to the rhetorical situation(s) of the past draft, reflecting on the ideas within the writing as well as the stories that exist around it (*What felt important then? What feels important now? What was getting in the way? What’s available now that wasn’t before—and why?*). When students return to past work with larger questions and goals in mind, they can see places where they have been stuck, scared, or resistant in their writing, as well as areas where they are thriving. If they ask hard questions of themselves and respond honestly, they will start to see patterns and trends in both the style and content of their writing—opportunities for disorientation and reorientation.

For some students, the “returning” experience of metanoic revision feels invigorating, and they embrace the assignment as an invitation to explore. One student framed the experience as an opportunity to write the “what if” version of the essay. In her final reflection, she wrote:

The more I thought about how [*metanoia*] applies to writing the more I realized that it isn't so much about regret, although we often need it, but about the missed opportunity. The piece that never was. Not necessarily a value judgment, but a statement of reality. The piece that I could have but didn't write. I tried to write a piece that was a possibility but was not realized [before]. I got to explore a what if.

For her revision, this student conducted a series of interviews with the goal of expanding what she could see in the topic. She completely rewrote the essay, stepping away from her deep attachment to the issue in an attempt to resee. In analyzing the past draft, this student saw an opportunity to embrace disorientation as an avenue to reinvention, driven by “what if” questions.

While metanoic revision can take students into exciting new realms, the experience simultaneously invites vulnerability. The uncharted territory aspect of *metanoia* can be freeing, but it also means that students are operating outside of their comfort zones and experimenting with new tools, strategies, and ideas that may or may not work. A student compared the feeling to a faulty parachute: “Writing in the *metanoia* style is fearlessness; it's jumping off a cliff with a very old, faulty parachute that may or may not open when you need it to.” Another student felt completely panicked and unprepared at the beginning of the metanoic revision project. Though she was happy with her project by the end, her final reflection revealed her initial sense of panic. She wrote, “Asking a student to do a major overhaul on a piece that they're already feeling uneasy about is like throwing a toddler into class 5 rapids to learn how to swim—it's incredibly easy to get swept up and panic, which will ultimately cause a person to sink.” While the “falling without a parachute” or “flailing in the rapids” feeling can be generative in terms of disorientation, we do not want to simply abandon our students to falling and flailing without support. And yet, if we provide too much guidance, we risk interrupting the agency and discovery that can emerge in the process. Pedagogically, then, we need to seek ways to couple disorienting moments with a concrete process or path of reflection and reorientation.

For the student who initially felt like she was operating with a faulty parachute, her writing process remained emotionally charged throughout, but she ended up arguing that the emotion was vital to her revision. She wrote: “The

whole *metanoia* process is peeling down an onion, but it's also like resetting a bone. That excruciating pain must be endured, the procedure must be done to save the body." The "pain," in her particular project, came from reinventing her style in terms of the voice, tone, and honesty. Early in the process, she talked about how she had always censored herself as a writer, always played it safe. In her revision, she took a "safe" essay about *Pride and Prejudice* and completely rewrote it, drawing out the piece that was buried underneath the initial version. When describing the transformation, she said, "Before it was just an assignment, now it's something else."

Of course, the metanoic revision project is still an assignment. A large part of the vulnerability comes from the fact that this revision process is not simply self-exploration; students are writing for an audience, and their work will be assessed. When I teach metanoic revision, I encourage students to listen to and trust themselves in new ways, developing skills in self-assessment and ownership of their writing process. Yet, the self-reflection component must not overshadow audience and context. During the revision process, we constantly circle back to questions of audience and purpose: *What is this new piece doing? Why? For whom?* When students submit their revision projects, I ask them to do a self-assessment and a final reflection. In preparing for the self-assessment aspect of the assignment, we discuss ways to push beyond the evaluative mode of "good" versus "bad." During the assessment process, I ask students to create their own rubric and provide a detailed reflection, both of which focus on the "larger narrative" and "on-going process" of the piece. Instead of a good/bad evaluation, I have found that students will often frame their process with the idea of "getting unstuck." As one student wrote, "We get stuck and we try to push forward. Instead of pushing forward, *metanoia* encourages us to look back." When students look back, they can identify their areas of "stuckness" and begin to move toward strategies, ideas, and questions that were not available before.

While self-assessment and reflection are central to the work of metanoic revision, classroom community is equally vital to the process. In particular, the experience of theory building unifies the group. To make sense of the concepts, students share a wide range of examples: personal experience, historical examples, artwork, popular culture, and so forth. From these examples, they make new connections, calling up other examples or referring to past conversations. In these moments they are actively building something together—something that feels completely new and also very familiar. In their reflections, students

will often describe the power of naming the concepts in their daily lives. As a student wrote:

There are countless ways that the new understanding of *kairos* and *metanoia* has a beneficial effect on my life. Throughout the semester, I've felt time and again that my consciousness has been expanded tenfold with just the knowledge of them. You see, I think the reason these concepts resonate so strongly is that I've always used them in my life and never been able to understand and verbalize their presence. . . . That was the magic: I have always been thinking in these terms and now somehow by identifying them, I've solidified the ways that I can improve personally.

This naming and theory-building work creates the sense of a community with a shared language. Students will often come to class eager to share *kairos* and *metanoia* stories—stories that other people would not see or understand because they do not know the language.

In addition to theory building, students collaborate in naming and fulfilling their revision goals. They each share their goals with the entire group and then check in with each other throughout the process. For example, one student, after looking back at her past work, realized that she tends to absorb the ideas of others, especially professors and writing center consultants. For the revision, she returned to an essay in order to “reclaim” the writing. Another student admitted the opposite: he never listens to revision suggestions and always thinks that he knows best. He returned to an essay that was workshopped in a past class with the goal of applying the group's ideas with an open mind. Another student realized that she had been holding back in her writing, so her revision process focused first on identifying the “edge”—the place where she begins to hold back. When describing her ongoing struggle with the “edge” to the class, she asked the group: “Is this something that you all think about and worry about? I am looking for a community in this situation.” When approached as community-based work, a metanoic revision process can move fear out of the body and onto the table, allowing students to transform what feels like a shortcoming or mistake into a new line of inquiry and experimentation.

In the earlier mentioned class discussion where students preferred the word *pain* to *regret*, there was one student who pushed especially hard to remove regret from the concept of *metanoia*. After a couple of weeks, though, that same student ended up arguing that regret is *essential* to the concept and

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overall experience of *metanoia*. When he started arguing for the importance of regret, the group asked him what had changed. He explained that early in the process he believed that regret never changes or goes away—our regrets are cemented into us. In his writing process the regret he was facing did not disappear, but he told the class that he “moved.” From the beginning of the process to the end, he could feel that there was movement in his writing. Thus when working with the concept of *metanoia*, our pedagogical emphasis must remain focused on this idea of *movement*—those experiences, large and small, where ideas, emotions, strategies, and questions turn and move in new directions.

Telling Different Stories

The Museo della Città in Mantua houses a fresco by the Mantegna school called *Occasio e Poenitentia* (1490). The painting features three figures: Opportunity (*Occasio*), a man attempting to seize Opportunity, and *Metanoia* (labeled *Poenitentia*). The figure of Opportunity sweeps across the scene on a sphere, her speed accentuated by the wings on her feet. As Opportunity passes by, the man reaches for her with both hands, but *Metanoia* places a hand on his chest to prevent him. The figure of *Metanoia* stands somber and still, restricting the man. She looks down at the ground, expressionless; the man watches in desperation as Opportunity slips away.

At first glance, the painting tells the story of a missed opportunity, but a closer look reveals another interpretation. The man’s hands are awkwardly positioned, suggesting that he reaches wildly, even impulsively, for Opportunity. Instead of being seen as restrictive, *Metanoia*’s hand on his chest can be read as a form of guidance or redirection. In the painting, Opportunity passes by on a sphere (a symbol of instability often associated with fickle Fortune), while *Metanoia* stands firmly and securely on a rectangular podium. *Occasio*’s eyes are covered by her hair, but *Metanoia* can see clearly. Standing above the man, *Metanoia* reaches down to calmly dissuade his rash behavior. Her hand on the man’s chest slows his wild movement and creates a moment of pause. This *Metanoia* represents longer roads of learning, full of missed moments, regrets, and turning points. Learning never unfolds as uninterrupted flight on the wings of Opportunity. Instead, learning occurs in messy spaces and those moments when *Metanoia* places a hand to the chest to create a pause, offering new opportunities for reflection and reorientation.

And yet a person looking to buy the postcard version of *Occasio e Poenitentia* in the Museo della Città gift shop will find that *Metanoia* has been cropped

out of the scene. The postcard shows only the figure of Opportunity, eliminating both the man and *Metanoia* from the story. All too often, the concept of *metanoia* is cropped out of conversations about, and visions of, opportunity and success. In discussions of teaching and learning, we tend to emphasize “teachable moments” and “epiphany moments.” But as writers, teachers, and learners, we spend most of our time on the “or else” side of opportunity, navigating the wide-open—and often lonely—spaces around *kairos* moments.

Though we have rarely used the word directly, scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have been calling *metanoia* into the conversation for decades. In her 1972 *College English* article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich describes revision as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18). Ten years later, Nancy Sommers calls for “revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new” (156). In 1996 Richard E. Miller envisions writing “as a place to see and re-see the components and possible trajectories of one’s lived experience and to situate and re-situate that experience within a world of other thoughts and other embodied reactions” (285). In 2003 William P. Banks describes his own metanoic writing process in “Written through the Body: Disruptions and ‘Personal’ Writing”; he writes, “My sending this essay to the editors of *College English* requires my willingness to revise, to resee myself and my connection to my discipline, and the published version interacts with readers, creating spaces for response and dissension” (34). These authors frame revision as a process of perpetually returning, reseeing, resituating. Such a process of composing acknowledges and creates space for emotional and intellectual transformations that are not only heard on the page but also felt in the body.

Naming *metanoia*’s presence in our work can create bridges, open new theoretical discussions, and invite pedagogical innovation. By seeking to better understand *metanoia* in connection with teaching and learning, we can become more attuned to the role of transformation in our writing and teaching. Moving forward, we must remember that the concept of *metanoia* demands *metanoia*. We must look and then look again, turn and return, in order to grasp and invent the transformative power that exists within the concept, within our students, and within us. *Metanoia* invites us to tell different stories about opportunity, regret, and learning. The concept gives us new language for transforming regret into learning or for embracing the learning alive in experiences of regret or feelings of failure. *Metanoia* draws on personal learning and discovery, as well

as social inquiry and critique, all with the goal of identifying the deeper ways in which changes of mind and heart operate in and around us.

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Notes

1. I provide a more detailed description of the *Kairos/Occasio* and *Metanoia* partnership in my *RSQ* article, “*Metanoia* and the Transformation of Opportunity.”
2. Here Fulkerson refers to the verb *metanoēō*. Nave offers the following distinction between the noun and verb forms: *metanoēō* means to “think differently, change one’s mind or view, from a different opinion, plan or purpose,” whereas *metanoia* means “a change of mind, heart, view, opinion or purpose” (41–42).
3. Nave argues that emotion is always present, to some degree, even in the earliest literary examples of *metanoia*, often as the experience of “having second thoughts” (41).
4. Instead of “repentance” Lattimore translates the metanoic response as “immediate remorse and reconsideration” (145). To put this quote into context, the Athenians voted to execute all Mytilenean adult males and to enslave the children and women; however, the next day, they reconsidered their decision to kill innocent people. Lattimore describes Book Three of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* as “arguably the darkest Thucydidean book” and “Thucydides’ most sustained display of open emotion” (130).
5. Determined to be a Hellenistic work, most scholars place the *Tablet of Cebes* in the first or second century. Since Lucian references the piece twice (once in *On Salaried Posts in Great Houses* and again in *A Professor of Public Speaking*), it must have been in circulation by circa 150 C.E. (Seddon 179). Though the *Tablet* is attributed to a person named Cebes, the specific identity of the author remains unknown. The author was thought to be Cebes of Thebes who studied with Pythagorean philosopher Philolaus before joining the Socratic circle; however, anachronisms in the content and language use make Cebes of Thebes an unlikely author (Fitzgerald and White 3; Seddon 177). In fact, the name Cebes could be a pseudonym. While the specific author remains unknown, the viewpoints have been described as “eclectic” and associated with a range of philosophical schools, including Socratic, Platonist, Stoic, Cynic, and Pythagorean (Fitzgerald and White 20). Despite the mysteries

surrounding the authorship, The *Tablet of Cebes* has been a popular and influential text, so much so that the allegory was used for centuries as a school text. M. B. Trapp describes the timeframe of the text's popularity more specifically, asserting that "The *Tablet* was first combined with a basic Greek grammar, Constantine Lascaris's, in an Aldine edition of 1502. The last English-language school edition, by C. S. Jeram, was published in 1898" (159). Though the *Tablet of Cebes* circulated widely, Trapp laments the lack of attention that the story has received in contemporary scholarship. According to Trapp, the allegory "deserves to be better known, both for its distinctive contribution to ancient moralizing literature, and for its place in the story of the influence of classical forms on European culture" (159).

6. *Metanoia* does not deliver the traveler directly to True Education, because, as the story goes, all travelers must enter the realm of False Education before they can begin to perceive the rocky and narrow path that leads to True Education. *Metanoia*, therefore, frees the traveler from lamentation and opens a new path. She serves as an essential stepping-stone in the longer journey of learning.

7. In the process of developing *metanoia*, I do not mean to suggest an oversimplification of *kairos*. While *kairos* is often interpreted as the "opportune moment," scholars have complicated the meaning and experience of both *kairos* and "moment" in a range of important ways. For example, in his recent *Philosophy and Rhetoric* article, "Cathedral of Kairos: Rhetoric and Revelation in the 'National House of Prayer,'" Richard Benjamin Crosby complicates the interpretation of *kairos* as a fleeting moment or single opportunity by arguing that spatial *kairos* lifts the "temporal contingency," keeping the *kairotic* moment "open and accessible indefinitely" (137). In a "spatial *kairos*," the "rhetorical charge of a kairic moment" can be captured and conveyed in physical spaces. Crosby does acknowledge the importance of traditional definitions of *kairos* (such as "right timing and due measure"), especially when it comes to practical applications of the concept, but his article takes readers beyond the *kairotic moment*.

8. Here I am thinking of the etymology of *kairos* and the connection to archery and weaving. As Hunter W. Stephenson explains, "*kairos* denotes the moment in which an arrow may be fired with sufficient force to penetrate the target" as well as "the moment in which the shuttle could be passed through the threads on the loom" (4). In both examples, the concept of *metanoia* can draw our attention away from the *kairotic* opening and out to the larger space or fabric from which the opening emerged.

9. Micciche's work speaks to the idea of "hidden narratives" embedded in emotion. For example, she writes, "For too long emotion has stood for subjugated knowledge, by functioning as analog to women, opinion, the personal, and the body" (*Doing Emotion* 7).

10. In the chapter “Attentive, Intelligent, Reasonable, and Responsible: Teaching Composition with Bernard Lonergan,” Priscilla Perkins argues for a pedagogical approach that involves a balance of inward and outward reflection, creating “habits of reflection.” She writes, “[A] pedagogy based on Lonergan’s method of self-appropriation presses students and teachers into habits of reflection: they begin to reappraise their earlier thoughts, words, and interactions in ways that enhance the best practices of process pedagogy” (74–75). I am also thinking of Richard E. Miller’s vision of self-reflexive writing “where a true revision not only of the writer’s argument but also of the writer’s circumstance can occur” (273).

11. When I invite students to theorize *metanoia*, my approach always varies according to the group; however, I do have some specific strategies for sparking and guiding the conversation. For example, in 2011 I received a research grant from the Stanford Program in Writing and Rhetoric that allowed me to travel through Italy, England, France, and Spain studying the figure of *Metanoia* in literature and artwork. In class discussion, I often share images and stories from my research as a way to either start or complicate the conversation. Additionally, I ask students to do their own research into the concept of *metanoia*, casting a wide net and sharing their findings with the group. Then, as a way to transition from the concept of *metanoia* into the metanoic revision project, I often share a montage of excerpts from my own writing, demonstrating the transformations in one piece of writing and narrating the larger contextual and emotional layers.

12. I have not yet introduced *metanoia* or metanoic revision into first-year writing courses, though I see potential (as well as challenges) for that context.

13. The idea of a layered and vertical writing process calls to mind Thomas Newkirk’s work with Montaigne. In “Montaigne’s Revisions,” Newkirk describes the “sensation of open conversational movement” in Montaigne’s writing, a sensation that “is created not in the act of composing but in the act of revision, as he finds seams, gaps, and openings in his original text and reenters his work.” Newkirk’s descriptions of the constant reentering of past writing and navigating of new openings resonates with the movement of the *kairos* and *metanoia* partnership.

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Kelly A. Myers

Kelly A. Myers teaches undergraduate- and graduate-level writing and rhetoric courses at Boise State University. Her work with *kairos* and *metanoia* started with her dissertation, and the concepts remain central to her scholarship and pedagogy. She won the 2011 Kneupper Award for her article "Metanoia and the Transformation of Opportunity." Her current project extends *kairos* and *metanoia* into the wider rhetoric of failure and resilience.