



An Ethos of Wander Time: Staying with the Trouble to Make Sense During Crises

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Abstract

Amidst a steady clamor about “learning loss” during the pandemic, a minority of educators have cautioned we must, in the words of Donna Haraway, “stay with the trouble,” giving children space to grieve, explore, and make sense of a new reality. In this paper I interrogate what it means to stay with trouble and specifically call for what I refer to as *wander time* to stay with trouble in schools. With the phrase wander time, I reference the 40 years the Ancient Israelites spent wandering the desert after they left Egypt as slaves and before they founded a nation in Israel. Taking a phenomenological approach, I then illustrate the practical implications and the potential of wander time through a study of my then preschool-age son’s yearlong self-directed and adult supported multimedia exploration of Transformers (vehicles in popular culture that transform into robots with human-like personalities). I document how through this exploration, my son articulated fears, stayed with, and made sense of troubles. I close by analyzing the pedagogy of wander time to suggest practical implications for schools.

Keywords Haraway · Trouble · Parenting · Trauma · Barad

Introduction

Normalcy . . . life goes on . . . words, hollow of content, paper over horrors . . . feeling, frozen Do not trouble the surface. Do not look. Do not say. Do not tell. Keep the secret. (Pat Carini in Himley and Carini 2010, 37)

A first grader wanders his urban public school, wordlessly pushing a small card towards those he encounters. He is met with kind befuddlement and is encouraged to return to class. At the end of the day, his teacher comments to me (a support teacher who works with him) that his behavior has been challenging all day. She then notes that his grandfather has died and that he brought the card from the funeral. The statements are made as parallel observations without an articulated link. Only in reflecting upon the exchange later am I struck that

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the loss of the grandfather and the bad day were facts his classroom teacher and I knew but did not meaningfully associate. Instead, in trying to keep him in the classroom doing his schoolwork, we did not make space or time for his loss.

Amidst a steady neoliberal clamor about “learning loss” in which the Covid-19 pandemic is treated as a lost and empty stretch of time (Frank 2022), a few teachers and parents have cautioned we must give children space to grieve, explore, and make sense of a new and radically changed reality. Though fixation on and concern about learning loss has been exacerbated by Covid-19, utilitarian obsessions with efficiency and productivity in schools has been a constant refrain for many years (Løvlie 2002; Shuffelton 2017). Likewise, current pleas to support children by staying with trauma echo previous calls for letting children dwell through play and exploration in moments of crises (Bentley 2015; Brownell 2021; Cowhey 2006; Silin 1995). In other words, while this paper was inspired by conditions amidst Covid and on one level offers a contextualized response, Covid laid bare and brought to a head a need for staying with trouble in schools that extends beyond the pandemic.

Within this context, this paper is premised on the argument that fixation on learning loss is not only misguided but also has the potential to be profoundly damaging as we neglect important elements of a child’s lifeworld (Murriss and Kohan 2020) such as mourning. As an alternative to an obsession with productivity in schools, I call for what I refer to as wander time as a way of conceiving “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016). With this phrase, I secularly invoke the Biblical story in which the future Israelites dwelled in the desert for 40 years, wandering after being released from slavery and prior to founding a nation state.

I first interpret this story alongside contemporary writing on time and mourning to argue that the nuances of the Biblical wandering creates an umbrella that gathers together an unplanned pause, mourning, and the richness of such dwelling. In illustrating the potential of the wander time as a frame for considering time in schools, I then tell of a preschool-age child, my son, George (pseudonym) dwelling in wander time in a yearlong self-directed and adult supported multimedia exploration of Transformers (vehicles in popular culture that transform into robots with human-like personalities). I close by offering a pedagogy of wander time to consider practical implications for how schools can better help children stay with the trouble.

Of note, as with the child in the hallway, as with my son, at stake is the well-being of the child. When considering this well-being, a key subtext is that children dwelling with trouble are often difficult to be around and support. They are, in the words of Carla Shalaby (2017), often the “troublemakers”—those who resist and challenge the norms in their bid to get their needs recognized and met. Both the boy in the hallway and my son, as they worked through their mourning, could be trouble for the adults around them. As such in calling for dwelling in wander time, I suggest a way forward for educators to stay with the trouble, work with behaviors such as wandering the hallway, without labeling the child as troubling, troublesome, or troubled.

Finally, the dwelling in the wander time to stay with the trouble is not the ultimate end. Instead, as the child works with and through the trouble, the hope is that they can find a more peaceable way forward.

Diffraction Reading as Parental Inquiry

Teacher inquiry is a mode of studying teaching where the questions and the solutions are drawn from the particulars of a practitioner's practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). A key premise of this work is that close physical and emotional proximity yields important insights that may be obscured from those who study at a distance. This does not discount other views but instead maintains the necessity of including the insights of those who work directly with and care for the children. Previously, I have extended this mode to parental inquiry, investigating one's practice as a parent (Furman 2021). Engaging in parental inquiry in this paper, I pull from daily personal journals where I documented my son's engagement with Transformers from March 2020 to June 2021, a large body of his Transformer artwork, as well as regular video documentation as he told stories and described his creations.

Barad (2017a) uses the concept of diffractions as a method of philosophical inquiry to describe how a provocation leads to a series of ripples. Importantly, one ripple does not replace another. Instead—stemming from the same provocation (such as a rock being thrown into water)—the ripples expand outward with each wave its own separate entity. The introduction of a new provocation does not necessarily cancel out what has come before—instead ripples may overlap.

From culling my data, I curate a series of episodes that trouble and inform as they ripple. As with television episodes in the Transformers universe, while themes, characters, and plot carry over between episodes, there is rarely progression or direct reference to occurrences from previous episodes. Instead, across the unifying substance of Transformers, my son's play rippled through materials from legos to dramatic play with the topics of exploration shifting. In playing in this way, wandering with Transformers, the medium helped him articulate fears and make sense of troubles in our periphery ranging from cancer, political and racist violence, and the pandemic.

An Ethos of Wander Time

Responding to the perennial question, what does it mean to live well, philosophers use the word ethos to describe guiding principles and corresponding conduct. In this section, I delineate an ethos of wander time as a means of staying with trouble in schools. I begin by putting forth the need for staying with trouble in relation to my opening anecdote and then describe how wander time provides a fruitful framework for staying with trouble that dually supports trouble and ultimately helps one move through it.

As in the opening example quotidian and utilitarian demands exert themselves – blocking even those of us who intend to be attentive. That day in school, the teacher and my focus on demands such as covering content prevented us from truly seeing a child in need of support. This, in turn, interfered with providing necessary space for grief. In contrast, this paper is premised on the belief that, as Haraway (2016) unequivocally states, “one must “stay with the trouble” to live with and through difficulties.

Drawing on the word trouble and its associations with disturbing and stirring up, Barad (2017a) writes:

In these troubling times, the urgency to trouble time, to shake it to its core, and to produce collective imaginaries that undo pervasive conceptions of temporarily that

take progress as inevitable and the past as something that has passed and is no longer with us is something so tangible, so visceral, that it can be felt in our individual and collective bodies. (p. 57)

In making this claim, Barad proceeds to radically trouble time—focusing on how the past and present live together. I apply Barad’s invitation to “trouble time” to how time can move in schools. Inspired by Barad’s analysis of the Jewish Kabbalah tradition and discussion of the nature of the time the Jewish people spent wandering the desert, I put forth wander time to capture a paradoxically fruitful and inactive time of mourning and growing.

First a bit of background. Barad (2017b) builds her analysis of pauses full of potentiality from Kabbalah, a form of Jewish mysticism that focuses on a conception of the infinite as dually full and not full. Barad (2017b) draws special attention to the presence of pauses within the Jewish calendar, Jewish narratives, and rituals like the Sabbath, the weekly required day of rest. One key pause, documented in books 2–5 of the Torah, and central to this project, is the 40 years the Jewish people wandered in the desert having fled slavery in Egypt and before founding a new nation.

In contrast with other ritual pauses such as the Sabbath, this pause was unplanned and unexpected. Further, wander time is presented as a curse—God’s punishment for the Jews lack of faith. That said, though unplanned and unwanted, the time spent in wandering proves integral. During these 40 years the Jews, having just fled slavery in Egypt, wander and receive the laws that will govern them. Importantly, in Jewish tradition the 40-year length of this journey is attributed not to the physical distance from Egypt to Israel but instead the psychological distance from slavery to nationhood. The majority of the Torah, books 2–5 take place during this time. In other words, during this time in which “nothing happens,” in a certain sense everything happens.

This pause is then ritualistically experienced annually by Jews in the holiday of Passover in which congregants, again as articulated by Barad (2017b), identify with the events of the Exodus not as history but as something re-lived. This is captured in much of the language of the Passover celebration including the closing refrain “next year in Jerusalem.” The repetition of the pause and hopeful phrase suggests that practitioners of the faith, and perhaps all people, periodically must pause in wander time, re-experiencing what it means to gaze towards but not reach a better and more productive future.

Wander time holds many features crucial to staying with trouble in the midst of crises and wedding a series of insights on time, trouble, and mourning in philosophy of education. In introducing, defining, and then calling for wander time, I first join Murriss and Kohan (2020) who describe an “urgency to trouble time” amidst “troubling times” and call upon us to “stir up trouble and double trouble school time” (1). To do so they use the Ancient Greek concepts of *Schole* and *Chronos* to identify different kinds of time. *Schole*, from which we have the word school, for the Greeks was a period of leisure for adults set aside for study apart from external demands (in addition to Murriss and Kohan 2020 see Gary 2006; Ildefonso-Sanchez 2019; Masschelein and Simons 2010). It was a space for dwelling with ideas much akin to Dewey’s (1916/1944) definition of play as purposeful activity directed by the child with no useful ends.

Wander time and the Passover ceremony that marks it yearly, serves as one type of *schole*—a pausing away from architectural nation-building to dwell in the desert. Such pausings, as highlighted by Løvlie (2002) and in the concept of wandering through the desert, are in fact pauses not actually in time but instead in space and utilitarian action. The effect as described by Løvlie (2002): “to keep the soul idle rather means to give the child his or her space for making relevant experiences, for self-initiated musings, for wonderings

about the world, for philosophizing” (338). As such movement associated with efficiency, getting directly from here to there, is replaced with dwelling – staying with in order to ultimately go forward (Hyttén 2017).

In this way, as with *scholē*, wander time is dually full and empty with nothing (in the way of production) and much (in the way of community growth) (Barad 2017a). Notably, as the Jews wander the desert they come together as a people, receive laws, and commune with God regularly. Where nothing happens in the literal movement from Egypt to Israel, everything happens in terms of nation-building aside from the actual building of the nation. The fifth book of the Torah closes with Moses dying after viewing Israel from afar. The more action-oriented plot then picks up in later Biblical texts once the Jews physically enter Israel.

Another refrain in the Passover ceremony is a call and response set of questions in which participants contrast what happens “on all other nights” with the leisurely approach taken “on this night.” In contrast with *scholē*, *chronos* represents the “on all other nights,” a chronological time with particular moments associated with particular purposes. *Chronos*, as characterized by Murriss and Kohan (2020), describes the kind of time currently found in schools in which each part of the day, year, and grade span is associated with the acquisition of particular knowledge and precise activities. The order matters as does the location of a skill in time. For example, it is assumed that one does not learn to multiply before one learns to add. Further, if a child does not learn something designated to kindergarten, they run the risk of simply not learning it at all. This ethos is captured in popular media with articles such as “Remote Kindergarten during Covid-19 Could Impact this Generation of Kids for their Lifetime” (Bauerlein 2021) that sound the alarm that if children do not learn skills at a particular time they may be forever behind.

In calling for spaces of wander time, I do not negate the value of chronological time in school. Further, the purpose of these distinctions is not to privilege or reify one approach to time. Instead, *scholē* is, in the words of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, “a space where (economic, social, cultural, political, private...) time is suspended” (551). *Scholē* offers a break from *chronos*.

To expand more on the tether between wander time and *chronos*, I sojourn briefly from wander time to Sabbath to highlight some important shared components. As Warnick (2020) highlights, the Sabbath, and I would add wander time, is part of a rhythm. Just as most time in a life is dictated by *chronos* with Sabbath happening once a week and Passover only once a year, *chronos* does and can dominate the school day.

As such *scholē* and *chronos* ought to be interwoven into the master school narrative. Students benefit when both exist alongside each other. While children have always found cracks within the structures of school for their own exploration (Brownell 2021; Furman 2019) currently *chronos* overwhelmingly dominates—squeezing out other forms of engagement (Murriss and Kohan 2020). In emphasizing *scholē* in this paper, I seek a balance of the two.

In seeking this balance, I draw attention to the necessity of the pause. As Warnick (2020) highlights, “he [theologian Walter Brueggemann] points to biblical passages where Sabbath keeping is a criterion— sometimes the only criterion—of group identity and membership. The community is to be open to foreigners and eunuchs, for example, but the condition is that they keep the Sabbath” (641). As Warnick (2020) concludes, “Sabbath keeping, then, is a way to recognize human dignity beyond market competition, and recognition for this dignity becomes the criterion for community inclusion” (p. 642). In connecting the dots laid by Warnick, in keeping Sabbath time a criterion for community membership, the need to dwell and rest becomes a condition for being

part of the group. Further emphasizing the importance of the Sabbath, not keeping it is a capital offense (Fox 1997). Reframed from a mortal failing, put positively, one might say it is a life-sustaining necessity.

Yet where wander time shares some of the rhythms and features of *shole* and the Sabbath, the phrase and associated myth adds some key nuances. Specifically, I emphasize two components of wander time that add an essential layer to the pauses I call for when staying with the trouble in schools. First, where the Sabbath reflects an intention, even a gift, wander time contains loss: the Israelites loss of faith in God, the loss of movement forward, the losses of slavery. As such wander time is a break that was unplanned but needed as a generation coped with a long-term trauma. Wandering through the desert, the future Israelites were haunted by both their experience in Egypt and the future people they would become. As such wander time troubles not only the speed in which we move through the present and the nature of our interactions but also what constitutes the present. Wander time pushes space/time to include engagement with that as well as those not present in the flesh (Barad 2017a, b).

Løvlie (2002) introduces another Greek term, *kairos* which “denotes the sense of doing the right thing at the right time” (p. 339) and argues that *kairos* as a teacher demands the teacher attend to students and, through this attention, be responsive to needs as they arise. Where the Sabbath suggests a ritualistic and regular rhythm needed by all (Warnick 2020), wander time carries with it responsiveness to particular people and circumstances. Importantly, Moses as leader did not intentionally roam the desert. Instead, God, according to the Biblical text, cursed the Israelites to wander because of their lack of faith in God and God’s plan (Fox 1997). A common interpretation is that this wandering was less intended as punishment. Instead, the wandering occurred because the generation who had been slaves in Egypt didn’t know how to behave as free people and they weren’t prepared for the Monotheistic demands that being Jewish entailed. 40 years, full of constant direct interaction with God that included receiving laws, prepared the people and marked a transition from one generation to another. This ensured that the founders of the new nation were prepared for the demands upon them. *Kairos* demanded a pause.

Tied into this responsiveness is mourning. Within this interpretation of the pause, the wandering also serves as a purging of the experience and trauma of slavery. The Israelites need to wander after the trauma of slavery and exile speaks to the need for time to dwell with a loss (Glaude 2008; Lussier 2021a and b; Stillwagon 2017). Again, the rhythm, in this case, between the mourning and the moving forward is necessary (Glaude 2008). Dwelling in the former is needed to be able to heal enough to go on. That said, mourning rarely, as James Stillwagon (2017) emphasizes, has a place in schools and this inhibits moving forward. Further, I was taught that the significance of 40 years is that it marks the passing of a generation. Not only do we each need spaces for mourning in our lives but some traumas shape a generation, changing the rhythms of their movement going forward.

Finally, highlighting the link between Sabbath time and the Exodus (from Egypt), Warnick (2020), again referencing Brueggemann’s analysis, notes that the Sabbath tradition began during the Exodus. As an example of *kairos*, the newly instituted Sabbath served as a rebellion against the experience of person-as-commodity that the Jews had experienced in Egypt. As such, an ethos of wander time serves one additional purpose. It offers an ongoing rebelling against and an opportunity to practice being a human that serves in sharp relief to the more utilitarian roles people are called to play in daily life (Gary 2006; Løvlie 2002; Shuffelton 2017). Wander time is therefore both necessary for healing and a rebellion against a culture that regularly denies the humanizing time to dwell.

Making Kin with Transformers

I now transition from a conceptual analysis of wander time to a phenomenological documentation of how wander time was experienced by my son. Written as episodes, I begin by introducing George and the historical and personal moment in which George's fascination with Transformers began in a Prequel. I then offer a brief overview of Transformers and the sources that served as George's authority on the topic. In list form, I give an overview of the different mediums that George used to explore this topic. Then I offer 5 episodes in which Transformer play intersected with the trouble of the moment.

In applying this frame, I begin by noting that though different terms were used, it is widely acknowledged that we found ourselves living in a wander time during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the sense that people were removed from the daily happenings that typically moved their lives forward. As with the time in the desert, the period was also marked by mourning and loss. Where early in the pandemic there was frequent encouragement to treat the time at home as rich in capacity for regenerative meaning (see *Mediators Beyond Borders* for a series of widely circulated poems expressing this sentiment), in relation to schools this discourse was quickly and largely drowned out by louder noise about learning loss (Frank 2022).

Prequel

I am in my bedroom silently crying. My 2.5 year old son, George, is wailing outside my door and my heart breaks as he is kept out with me in—quarantined.

This is now a familiar story for many across the globe but when it occurred in the winter of 2018, it was a far less known experience. At that time, I was about to get surgery to treat breast cancer and my son had picked up a cold. If I got sick I would have to postpone my surgery and that felt like an impossibility given the challenges of arranging the schedules of our medical team and the short window we had to operate given I was also pregnant. So, I found myself doing something I had never done as a mother. I was staying away from my child while he was sick. When his cries penetrate through the locked door, I was devastated. Finally we dropped him off at his grandmother's—hoping he (we) would feel my loss less if he was further away from it.

Over the course of that year my son accompanied my cancer treatment—regular drives across state lines, surgery which included more of my absence and my inability to give him a firm hug for weeks, then pick him up for months, chemotherapy—more absences, exhaustion, and the change of my appearance. We did our best to explain—how surgery looked like an attack but was removing something hidden but dangerous, how chemotherapy caused a sick response but, again, was healing. As would soon become a world-wide experience, that year my family lived with the pernicious effect of hidden and severe threats.

My child was precocious—the age based guidelines the cancer center gave us for discussing illness with children were dually too young and too old for him and so we did our best to explain without resources. Over the course of that harrowing year, he came to dread his beloved grandparents. My always very busy and bright child who was yet to have a tantrum, responded somewhat stoically and then, when the treatment ended, he exploded. Tantrums coupled with intense clinging made up our days. Just as we, the adults, were

ready to relax into a craved peace, the trouble held in my son's body exploded, rippling out into our daily lives.

Unlike with the child in the hallway at the start of this paper, unlike most teachers' experiences in a school (Silin 1995), I knew the contours of my child's grief. I had felt the losses alongside him. Yet, I still found myself befuddled by the tantrums. Though we were bound by a more forgiving schedule than most schools afford—dinner still needed to be cooked as did drop off and pick up at childcare. The tantrums and the chronos of our daily lives intersected and interfered with each other. Despite knowing the root of his struggles—when his anger arose or when he clung tightly in an inopportune moment, I struggled to stay with the trouble. In fact, I sought the stability of chronos. Though I had experienced the initial trouble alongside my son, I do not know how to stay with it with him.

Kairos, as noted, is an attentiveness to what is needed in a particular moment in time (Løvlie 2002). In a quote I turn to so often it has been like a mantra, teacher researcher Gallas (1991) writes of a student she initially found perplexing:

Juan was teaching me once again a lesson that I seem to have to relearn each year: When given the opportunity, listen to the children. They will show you what they know and how they learn best, and often that way is not the teacher's way. (132)

Seeking out resources to support George proved largely unhelpful. Instead, as I describe below, it was George who found and then showed us the way.

Interlude

What are Transformers? Transformers are vehicles that take a robot (humanlike) form. They share many qualities with people (such as having personalities and experiencing emotions) and many differences (they subsist on fuel and are made of metal). Transformers frequently operate alongside humans and have human friends who tend to be children or adolescents. These children are usually loners, connecting better with Transformers than human peers. The Transformers are mostly adults although some, often those closest to the child side-kicks, have more childlike or adolescent qualities. The Transformers universe shares many of the same characters across different shows. Though drawn somewhat differently, there is commonality in the appearance of the characters, their personality, and how they sound. There are many shows with similar plot twists, characters, and themes where the transforming vehicles are called by a name other than Transformer such as Rescue Bots, Go Bots, and Tobots.

The plot of the episodes and movies follows the same general arc. Autobots (unequivocally good guys) constantly battle the Decepticons (pure bad guys). The autobots collaborate, are generous, humble, and often have human friends they work with. The Decepticons frequently battle each other, are jealous, competitive, and cruel. They rarely have human friends but instead are bent on harming people. The downfall of both autobots and Decepticons tends to be hubris, vanity, and competitiveness with their peer group. Creatures in both groups have particular skills and qualities—often related to their names. For example, "Arachnid" has spider-like powers and Optimus Prime is the supreme leader of the autobots and has impeccable character. Episodes tend to end with a temporary, albeit sometimes small, victory for the autobots. In some of the series, a plot progresses across episodes. In others, each episode tells a separate story with no progression. Variations are geared towards the very young with relatively benign dramas and more decisive victories.

Others are geared presumably towards older children with louder sound effects, more foreboding music, violent battles, and less resolution. One of the latter series George and I named “really violent Transformers” and we both determined in the midst of a disturbing episode that this was not for him. One can purchase a vast array of Transformers action figures, costumes, and gear.

Mediums of Exploration George explored transformers through regular watching of the show. He sometimes watched a series all the way through (sometimes multiple times) and other times moved between series. He also watched a number of the movies affiliated with Transformers. Many but not all of the shows he would watch repeatedly. Amidst this focus, he would choose or accept my guidance, to watch other things for brief stretches including a number of series that teach scientific concepts to young children.

George played Transformers with action figures purchased for him (whose number accumulated over time). He acted out Transformers periodically and made Transformer costumes with assistance. He drew 100s of Transformer images, created Transformer collages with cut-outs, had us print out images from the internet that he then cut-out as “paper dolls,” made Transformers out of legos. In fact, he co-opted nearly any item he could find in the house to be a Transformer—such as a pair of earrings he found next to my desk. He then would use these images to play out scenes—borrowing language and plots from the movies while interjecting (as described below) his own themes (Dyson 1997). This addition of his own concepts also emerged in his creations as he began making up his own characters. For example, a long y shaped stick he found outside became “Tree-er”—an autobot who could blend into the environment and had squirrel-like abilities to jump from tree to tree. Most of the materials he used were objects found around the house or low cost.

Aside from the costumes and “paper dolls” he asked us to draw, nearly all this work was done with minimal adult engagement. We might get him started on a project, offer feedback on how to make something, demonstrate something like how to draw the legs of the Transformers, and make a few comments about what he was watching. This was almost entirely independent work done during what we called “George alone time” when I was working in a separate room.

Episode 1: “Starscream is Everywhere”

In March 2020, my work abruptly moved remote and my husband and I pulled George out of preschool. I worked through the mornings and then spent what felt like endless hours wandering through our large yard surrounded by woods or down the dirt road together. One day this activity was coupled with enacting the plot of Transformers. We raced around our yard, peaking around trees in search of the villain Starscream. We’d yell to him in an official voice, “Starscream. Starscream.” At some point George interrupted the game to ponder, “Starscream is everywhere.” The phrase stayed with my adult ears. At the time I was reading the philosopher Maurice Blanchot (1995) who, writing of the Holocaust as “the disaster” begins “the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact” (p.1). Starscream like cancer, like the virus lurked around every corner, always there and never there. The threat was constant and the potential destruction encompassing.

Episode 2: “After the Second Billy Goat Gruff Came Optimus Prime”

We were sitting on the floor of George’s room. He had recently watched an animated version of the Billy Goats Gruff—a story he did not previously know. He discussed the story

with interest. Of particular intrigue is what George and I perceive as an unnecessary pause. Namely we grappled with why the big Billy Goat didn't simply go first and, in doing so, end the conflict once and for all. Seeking a means to entertain him, I gathered goats from a collection of plastic farm animals. Then with an arch shaped block I created a bridge and started marching the goat across placing a "troll" beneath the bridge. I told the story, acting it out with the toys. George joined me in telling the story and moving along the pieces. After, I narrated, "then after the third Billy Goat," he quickly chimed in "After the third Billy Goat comes Optimus Prime." His Optimus action figure then easily and swiftly defeated the troll making things safe for all goats. I am left wondering about a world in which a force of good is powerful enough to fully vanquish all cruelty in its path and struck by the speed of this alternative resolution.

Episode 3: "Trump is Like Megatron Only Megatron is a Lot Bigger" and "Bumblebee is Like Sam"

Much of the dinner table talk in our American household in the Fall of 2020 turned to the presidential election. Though we (my husband and I and my parents who were living with us during the height of the pandemic) tried to keep our anxiety around the upcoming election tempered, it seeped through as did our distress over the January 6th uprising. When asked why we didn't like then president Donald Trump—we explained we found him mean, a bully. After the uprising, we shielded George from many details—including images and videos of the capital riot but our distress was surely palpable. One evening, following the adult talk, George announced, "Trump is like Megatron [the cruel and evil leader of the Decepticons] only Megatron is a lot bigger." As with the Billy Goats Gruff, George describes a world populated with villains and heroes.

Showing similar analogous thinking but in a very different context, one day as I pushed the stroller into the garage after a walk, George mused that his baby brother, Sam, was "Bumblebee." "Why?" I asked. "Well Bumblebee is the cute one." George later made an Optimus Prime costume for himself and a Bumblebee costume for Sam. Months later [as described in Episode 5, George assumed the identity of Bumblebee at a playground with older children]. I wonder, what does it mean for him to compare his very real brother with the fictional and somewhat superficially developed character? What does the Transformer universe with its binaries between good and evil and its uni-dimensional characters mean when applied to real people and even tried on for size?

Episode 4: "The Autobots Battling Decepticons are Like Chemotherapy Battling Cancer"

We have moved. In the winter and spring of 2021, our daily walking ritual now brings us through a small suburb as opposed to our prior woodsy playscape. Now teaching on zoom, most days I try to slip away from the computer for a walk outside with George. We typically walk in a square formation around the block. One day as we walked and seemingly out of nowhere George pronounced, "the Autobots battling Decepticons are like chemotherapy battling cancer." He says no more when I ask him what he means. The comment seemed to slip away as abruptly as it has emerged. I am left hoping he is correct, seeking the reassurance of a world where things always end up right.

Episode 4: “I Wish I Were a Robot so I Could Live Forever”

George regularly brought up fears about death—his own and family members. My husband and I respond by affirming that he and the rest of our family will die but it is likely a long way off. *I Love You Forever* (Munsch and McGraw 1988), a children’s book depicting the life cycle of a child and his mother, helped George to see how much living would happen before any of us were old. Additionally, one night his father counted out to 80 to showcase how long it would take before any of us might die. After a few weeks of this talk, George seemed comforted that death was likely a long way off and by our refrain “by the time it comes you will be ready for it.” Around four-years-old George began to repeatedly express his desire to be a robot and made the robot costumes for himself and Sam. When I asked about his interest in being a robot, he explained robots, unlike people, could live forever.

Episode 5: “This is a Portal:” Entangling Others and Being Entangled in the Plotlines of Peers

Right before the pandemic moved us remote, George established a best friend at preschool. Periodically he and his friend sent “jokes” in which they recorded themselves telling humorous stories. After over a year of separation, they finally had a playdate. Remembering their shared interest in Transformers, before the playdate George expressed eagerness to play Transformers together. As soon as the boys met up at a local playground they began an imaginative game of Transformers that involved the climbing structures and ultimately incorporated other children. At one point there were about 7 boys playing with George and his friend guiding the game. George’s friend wanted to include portals—a feature of one of the Transformers shows that George had been less interested in. He also talked a lot about superheroes. George played along and talked about portals when back at home where he also began watching shows featuring the other superheroes and soon after lost interest in Transformers.

The Potentiality of Wander Time

As illustrated in the episodes, through his obsession with Transformers, George wandered, circled around but, in this fixation on topic, ultimately grew in the ways needed to move forward. Transformers carried George through wander time, offering a landscape around which he could pivot as he processed many traumas: my cancer, the Covid-19 pandemic, and national political unrest. While George’s tantrum slowly abated in the years that followed, I cannot directly attribute Transformers to that growth. Instead, my claims are humble. Transformers provided George with a way of sitting with a trauma, playing it out, tumbling ideas and feelings over and through his mind and body. This is the potentiality of wander time as it marks a period of fullness apart from results that is necessary for but not oriented towards results (Taylor 2019).

Claiming Wander Time Within the Chronos of School

Covid-19 unusually meant that there was a shared and recognizable wound felt throughout the world. As such it provided a rare moment in which collectively we experienced wander time. Yet, the implications of this must be applied more broadly. As we lived through my

cancer treatment, my husband often commented this was our “lost year.” With this phrase he captured the fact that as we devoted our energy to my survival, we stepped away from jobs, school, and our other typical obligations. Chronos stopped for us but, importantly, not for those around us. As emphasized in the start of this paper, when Covid came to our shores, I had the uncanny experience that the rest of the world was now joining our family in wander time. As such, where most families experiences a trauma that demands wander time at some point, the need for this time is rarely synchronized. This is a good thing, allowing much of the world to function at any given moment, but it also demands sensitivity. As some of us hurtle through chronos—others need space for wander time. What does this mean for schools in the wake of Covid and going forward?

During recess, when staring out the window during a lesson, on the back of an assigned worksheet, in pushing conversations “off topic,” children in schools claim *scholē* even in the midst of chronos. As the opening vignette suggests and is argued by Stillwagon (2017) mourning too is often present but at the boundaries. Yet, while children can and do make meaning on their own on the outskirts of the school curriculum, if we believe that adults and peers provide guidance, support, and help children make meaning then it is important that we find places to join children in these endeavors (Arendt 1954; Furman 2019; Silin 1995).

In the Poem, “Just as the Calendar Began to Say Summer” (Crosby 2011), Mary Oliver reverses the typical structure of what is lost and what is meaningful time. She writes:

“I went out of the schoolhouse fast/and through the garden to the woods,/and spent all summer forgetting what I’d been taught.” After listing a series of superficial learnings “two times two, and diligence and so forth,” Oliver concludes, “By fall I had healed somewhat, but was summoned back/to the chalky rooms and the desks to sit and remember” the summer beauty and meaning of the world around her. Not only does meaning and healing occur out of school but also school, for Oliver in this poem and Stillwagon (2017) is a hurt that must be recovered from.

Walking the hall of his school, my former student operated with limited choice of material. Where the hall was possibly his preferred playscape to explore emotions brought up by his grandfather’s death, he more likely left his classroom because in the hall, he could wander away from the curriculum and the teachers’ demands. The relative freedom offered a reprieve from chronos. He then explored his loss by way of the funeral card, trying without success to entangle others in his grief.

He wandered alone—without friends or teachers to support him emotionally or help him to think through his loss through play or conversation. This left him navigating a painful situation without interpersonal support at school. In contrast, the Ancient Israelites though wandered as a people – working through loss and enduring together. In closing, I therefore call upon teachers and schools to find spaces for wander time within the chronological confines of school. In analyzing the ripples of George’s transformer play, six elements stand out as crucial to his capacity to stay with the trouble.

- A broad variety of mediums sustained this work and offered different perspectives. Most materials used were cheap and easily locatable. For example, the drawing pad he used came from the grocery store. In fact, the act of culling through available materials led to interesting and important revelations (for another example see the discussion of found poems in Stillwagon 2017, 64) such as the juxtaposition of Optimus Prime and the Billy Goats Gruff or Trump and Megatron.
- He chose content (Transformers) that resonated with his own concerns, needs, and rhythms. This choice was affirmed as I resisted the urge to sanction an obsession with a

television show I didn't particularly like (Dyson 1997; Thiel 2015). Instead, when critical, I entered into his content in a conversational form or through play as opposed to dictating my own content or taking over his (Dyson 1997; Furman 2019).

- The content he chose involved storytelling and fantasy. In writing and rewriting narratives, he found ways to process trouble (Cooper 2021; Paley 2005). Further, by writing narratives that included both his personal experience and the storylines he picked up from Transformers, he drew connections that, again, helped him make sense of the world around him (Paley 1990).
- He entangled both peers and adults in his fascination (Dyson 1997; Thiel 2015). In this way, transformers provided a means of “making kin” (Haraway 2016) with both peers and adults. These relationships shifted the play in important ways. In making kin – he was influenced both by adults (including my comments about misogynistic tendencies in the shows) and children. In fact, the obsession with Transformers began with a friends' shared interest in and George's father's introduction of a favorite childhood show and began to wane when the same friend's interests began to shift to the Justice League superheros (an interest again reinforced by his father's interests). At the playground, George and his friend's interest in Transformers facilitated a game with strangers. As children assumed characters—the roles of interaction between each other were somewhat clear. For example, an older child assumed the role of Optimus Prime and with that identity, led the other children for a period of time. George elected to be Bumblebee, “the friendly one.”
- George's play and the insights he gleaned from it followed a rhythm that I neither dictated nor could predict. For example, his interest in Transformers (as opposed to other shows), his acknowledgment of cancer, and his expressed concern about death all emerged and disappeared without clear (to me) provocations.
- This play was done almost entirely independent of adult supervision and direction. It tended to germinate in the least structured parts of day such as when I turned my attention from George to work at my computer and he was pushed to play alone.

Wander time cuts across these six elements. Unencumbered by the kind of objectives that adult work places on activities (Dewey 1916), George followed the rhythms of his own interests and, later, that of his peers. It was this interest as opposed to predetermined time or plans that determined the nature of each exploration for George. When he lost interest, on a given day or after many months, he simply stopped.

Children who have experienced troubles often respond in behaviors that are dually mysterious and troubling for adults. Such children often have trouble in school and are even frequently labeled and dismissed as troublemakers (Smith 2007; Stillwagon 2017). Even when teachers, like myself, know a child has experienced something troubling and are sympathetic, this concern doesn't necessarily lead to responses that help the child.

In encouraging teachers to stay with the trouble through enacting spaces of wander time and drawing on my learning from George, I first hope to avoid a nation of children forced to wander the halls with evidence of their losses noted but largely unacknowledged. Second, I seek an expanded view of what a good use of time might be—one that includes the kind of independent and unstructured play George engaged in. A play that benefited from adult check-ins but minimal adult intervention. Third, I want to reaffirm that the key to this play is not any particular content but the chance to follow one's interest without external direction. During wander time the journey and not the destination is the point.

Asked in the workshop associated with this special issue what kind of school I pictured, my mind first first went to my own teaching with much open-ended curriculum and access

to materials (see Furman, 2015 for a description). Yet, as I thought through the key lessons described above, I found myself describing George's Montessori school. I noted how amidst the somewhat rigid structures of the Montessori method, George experienced long stretches in the day for undirected play outdoors and with art materials; how as he daily completes his "works" – activities he's chosen to work on many of which include much copying and invite little creativity, he worked with peers without his talk monitored; how some days, especially when he started, he did not choose a work but watched the others and other days, by his description, silliness or deep conversation erupts with a peer and the work is temporarily put aside; how the adults in the space will instruct briefly and then step back but always seem welcoming of a good chat.

In other words, schools that foster staying with trouble through wander time can look very different. What seems key is that we provide adequate time in spaces provisioned with choice of materials, letting children explore the content that interests them, with opportunities for peer collaboration children and adult support, children would find the ways they must stay with the trouble and in doing so, find a way to make meaning and find comfort in these troubling times.

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