Culture



Mark Ruffalo and Tom Pelphrey in "Task". (HBO)

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Few moments on television reflect the sort of grief and grace displayed in "Task" by Mark Ruffalo as Tom Brandis, a former Catholic priest turned FBI agent tasked with

investigating a string of armed robberies in Philadelphia "trap houses." In the finale, turning to his adopted son, Ethan—the person responsible for the death of Tom's wife Susan during an episode of psychosis—he strains to say what he likely could not until the very end of the show: "I forgive you. I love you."

The show's central conflict between the garbage collector Robbie Prendergrast and the Dark Hearts, a national drug and motorcycle gang terrorizing Philadelphia, sets the story in motion. We quickly learn that a gang member's wife was involved romantically with Robbie's brother, Billy, a move which ultimately got him killed. Robbie vows to seek revenge and set his family up for financial gain through a string of robberies against the gang with his cousin, Cliff. The robberies set up the conditions for more violence and, thus, the task force led by Agent Brandis.

This show, however, isn't about cops and robbers. It is about the interior lives of the characters.

Robbie grieves the loss of Billy, as does Maeve, Billy's daughter. Robbie and his children also grieve that his wife has abandoned the family. Things seem chaotic in the household. Maeve ends up taking care of the children, acting as a mother despite never having signed up for the position. Robbie and Cliff identify not as go-getters, but as scrappers, people who feel they must claw their way from behind. They do so by robbing houses intended to be the sites of sales for the Dark Hearts. When a robbery goes wrong and a gang member is killed, Robbie and Cliff take a duffle bag filled with pure fentanyl and kidnap a child.

Tom, on the other hand, is grieving the loss of his wife, at the hands of the now-incarcerated Ethan. As a result, Ethan's biological sister, Emily, grieves the loss of her mother and her brother. They mostly experience grief as many of us do, feeling alone and trying to find ways to cope with the seemingly unexplainable. The pain can seem so unbearable that it overwhelms them. In Tom's case, he cannot spend a day away from vodka, placing it into a souvenir Phillies cup out of shame. Emily often takes care of him, with neither one relaying their true feelings to the other.

By the end of the show, when you learn about the betrayal within the Dark Hearts and in the task force led by Tom, the show nearly becomes a sort of gritty detective drama articulated by sin, decay, and betrayal. However, the creator of the show, Brad Ingelsby, does not give into this temptation, opting instead to show the way that decisions—even bad ones—come from a complicated place in a world filled with paradox and potential.



(HBO)

Writing rather defiantly in his defense of detective stories, G. K. Chesterton once wrote that the detective in a story, vigorously standing in bold defense of justice, is the "original and poetic figure," the human standing against the devolution of the human into animality. Rather than visit the detective story for its pure entertainment value, Chesterton admonishes the reader to consider the moral imagination of the genre instead of taking the world's fallenness as a given.

Chesterton's words seem accurate as it relates to "Task," but the show portrays grief and doubt in a complex way. For example: Tom used to be in the priesthood, but feels that, despite his sense of being part of something bigger than himself, the closer he got to the tasks of the priesthood, the further away he felt from God.

Have you ever felt adrift, existentially so far away from home you didn't know the way back? Think of the writer of Ecclesiastes, whose reflection about the meaninglessness of things gives sense to this feeling of unmooring. "All is vanity," the Preacher wrote, a "chasing after the wind." Tom's givenness to drunkenness on a nightly basis, along with his reflections on the divine life with a priest friend, poetically mirrors the writer's sentiment. The voice inside Tom, which used to guide him, seems to be proactively silent in the face of crushing suffering. That suffering seems to be taken on by him individually as he attempts to deal with it both in his private and public life.

In part, the show is about mourning, and its commentary is both about suffering and the work of mourning. As opposed to Chesterton's "Father Brown" stories, in which

the protagonist ends the story giving shape to the moral order of the universe, Tom's reflections cannot make complete sense of things. We do, however, leave the show feeling like things move toward some form of redemption, for both Tom and Robbie.

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Personal suffering is never individual, but shared. We all feel each other suffer, and the attempt to cover over that shared reality has led to the most violent of actions, especially in the imposed suffering of social injustice. W. E. B. Du Bois, in "The Souls of Black Folk," reflected on the work of mourning in his discussion of the spiritual and cultural significance behind what he called the "sorrow songs." These songs of enslaved African Americans reflect a deep and collective suffering, one which, while often rejected and ignored, is the nation's inheritance. Du Bois is clear that America would not be America without the sorrow songs.

Despite the suffering inflicted upon Black people for the last four centuries by their own nation, Du Bois characterizes the expression of suffering of the enslaved as both rooted in their suffering as well as reaching beyond it. In the chapter, "Of the Sorrow Songs," Du Bois states that despite the decision of the country, a "headstrong, careless people," to neglect the way of "Justice, Mercy, and Truth," it has been precisely in the sorrow songs that the invitation has been offered to hope and call forth "faith in the ultimate justice of things."

> Even so is the hope that sang in the songs of my fathers well sung. If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free.

Du Bois' musings on the role of the sorrow songs as a collective spiritual heritage relates suffering and mourning to both a personal emotion and a shared, historical experience. His reflection on the personal emotion of suffering is nothing other than in its shared accent, that pain can be transformed into an eternal hope that surpasses all understanding and finitude. There is something so deeply extraordinary about such a truth, that humans in their worst possible moments can strive to live more fully with each other. Such was the message of the sorrow songs

as described in "The Souls of Black Folk," and Du Bois' message resounds in his final piece of writing in 1963 that the "only possible death is to lose belief in this truth."

The resonance of Du Bois' proclamation is a truth re-told in "Task," albeit with a different register. He attempted to communicate something which pierces the veil, and "Task" attempted to communicate something similar in its own little way. As a father and husband learns to live with his wife's death at the hands of his son, all sorts of temptations begin to creep in—the most primal of which is the temptation to become cynical. Cynicism is the hopelessness of a life lived in isolation, relegating oneself to the depths of loneliness and giving into despair. The "sorrow songs" were not given to cynicism but a hopeful future, one tied to a collective moral and spiritual yearning.

Too much of our collective discourse today feels like an advertisement for cynicism. It's hard not to feel it in nearly every news segment, internet video, opinion column, or social media post. The state of our political landscape often fails to yield any hope, especially in this particular time, when the good, true, and the beautiful are afterthoughts; indeed, lesser versions are sold to us. Where, then, can we find hope?

"Task" seems to speak deeply to the temptation that leads to cynicism. It speaks across and beyond its small tale, one which Chesterton might think of as a story tinted with the poetic at its very heart. Within this story of an FBI agent trying to bring robbers to justice is a reflection on the justice imbued in the face of the world, which is crying out for the veil to be torn and for the oppressed to go free. Tom and Robbie remind us that we are not our situations and that there is something hopeful about how sharing ourselves with others might open up a new way to be in the world.

At the end of the show, Tom notes that he did not want Ethan to be defined by the murder of his mother. "There was also joy," Tom says, "so much joy," such as the first time Ethan called him "Dad"; when Ethan went to New York City, bought 25 hamburgers, and handed them out to homeless people; or when an art teacher saw him as a bright light of a child.

It is in Tom's recollection of the joy he experienced with Ethan that he was ultimately able to forgive. It is also therein that he is able to tell Ethan that on the day he is released—whether in this life or the next—he will be waiting to receive him, like the

father who pulls up his garments to run toward his wayward, prodigal son.

Forgiving, for Tom, doesn't mean forgetting, and doesn't make the pain go away. Like the collective mourning of the "sorrow songs," mourning gives shape to a future otherwise.

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