

The Loss of an Enemy: *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and the Five Stages of Grief

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Grief is a curious thing. Neither linear nor well-defined, grief is an experience that everyone becomes acquainted with on their own terms. To mourn the loss of someone dear to you is incredibly difficult, and there is no *one* way to grieve. Regardless, there are several theories that attempt to explain grief, with one of the most well-known being the Five Stages theory. Developed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, this theory posits that grieving individuals go through five stages as they mourn the loss of a loved one: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1970).

In theory, practice, and media, the Five Stages is usually seen as applicable only to those grieving loved ones. However, as wonderfully depicted in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (*B99*), grief—and the Five Stages—is not simply reserved for those we love or with whom we had a healthy relationship. Rather, we can mourn for anyone who has played a significant role in, or had a profound impact on, our life, whether good or bad. *B99* takes this on directly through the depiction of Captain Raymond Holt (Andre Braugher) and Madeline Wuntch (Kyra Sedgwick), “bitter rivals” whose careers and lives were entangled for decades. Though they may have hated one another from the bottoms of their hearts, Wuntch’s unexpected death and Holt’s grief over losing her in *B99*’s seventh season is an excellent demonstration of how nontraditional, unexpected grief is both just as valid and important as traditional grief *and* can still similarly proceed through the Five Stages.

In order to understand how Holt’s grief is nontraditional, it’s important to explore how Holt and Wuntch’s relationship changed over the years. Originally, Holt and Wuntch were friends. In the early stages of their NYPD careers, they were so close, in fact, that Wuntch volunteered to write Holt a letter of recommendation when he was up for a promotion. However, the night before she was to submit the letter, Holt had invited Wuntch over for drinks. While he was planning to confess to Wuntch his sexuality, Wuntch misinterpreted the invitation and showed up to Holt’s apartment in a trench coat and lingerie: a clear attempt to seduce Holt. Quickly, Holt revealed to

Wuntch that he was gay, and when he did not get the promotion in the days following, he assumed that she wrote a negative letter and “sabotaged [his] career because [he] refused to bed her” (Liedman & Goss, 2014, 10:32).

Twenty-five years later, Holt learns that Wuntch *had* written a positive letter of recommendation about him, despite their misunderstanding. He’s shocked, and Wuntch, too, is surprised, as she didn’t know that this letter was the root of Holt’s resentment. Rather, Wuntch assumed that their grudge began when Holt attempted to get her kicked off the force for accidentally shooting him. Ever since *that* miscommunication, they were bitter enemies, and the hatred only continued to grow as they continuously retaliated against one another. (Liedman & Goss, 2014)

However, there were times when Wuntch and Holt could put their differences aside and work together for the greater good. Specifically, at the end of *B99*’s sixth season, Wuntch and Holt teamed up in a plot to take down the current NYPD Commissioner. Though Holt and Wuntch bickered and fought the entire time, they reached a truce, and as a result of their teamwork, successfully managed to take Kelly down. Then, Wuntch was promoted, becoming the interim commissioner of the NYPD. Her first action in her new role, however? To humiliate Holt. (Goor & Del Tredici, 2019)

In their time spent working together on the plot to take Kelly down, Holt mindlessly revealed to Wuntch that he was promoted to detective after only a month of working as a patrolman, which is in violation of the NYPD’s rules (Goor & Del Tredici, 2019). Wuntch’s first act as commissioner, then, was to demote Holt back to a beat cop, stripping him of his achievements, title, and rank (Goor & Del Tredici, 2019). Thus, the seventh season of *B99* begins with Holt as a uniformed officer, struggling to deal with his new position and the fact that his life’s work was ripped away from him in a flash (Goor & Del Tredici, 2019). However, in the seventh episode of this season, titled “Ding Dong,” a shocking twist is revealed: Wuntch has unexpectedly passed away.

Here, Holt starts the Five Stages. At first, Holt reacts with denial; when Lieutenant Terry Jeffords delivers the news that Wuntch is dead, Holt remarks, “Oh, Terry. Zombies can’t die. This is some sort of scam” (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 1:24). Jeffords asks if Holt would like to see her casket, to which he says yes, and upon seeing Wuntch’s body, Holt decides, “Oh, she is very dead” (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 1:50).

Now, Holt deviates from the model here, as he’s excited by the confirmation of Wuntch’s death. He is going to be reinstated as captain, and overwhelmed with joy, Holt returns to the precinct and begins to happily pass out bagels, exclaiming: “Ding dong, the Wuntch is dead!” (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 3:06). Holt feels vindicated; as he tells one of the detectives, “Her death means I’ve won. It’s finally over” (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 4:04).

Of course, as soon as he says that, Holt receives an email from Wuntch’s lawyers, with the subject line: “It’s not over.” Attached to the email is a video of Wuntch, in which she explains:

I told everyone in my final days, we reconciled and you insisted on hosting and organizing my NYPD memorial service. I know you won’t be able to resist badmouthing me at the service... when you speak ill of me, it will end your career. It’s over. I won. Bye, Raymond. (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 6:00)

After contacting the headquarters of the NYPD, Holt discovers that there is no possible way he can get out of hosting Wuntch’s memorial service, and he feels doomed. When he attempts to write a kind speech about her, for example, it turns into a rage-induced rant that is 20 pages long. In light of this, he enlists the help of Sargent Amy Santiago and Detective Rosa Diaz to throw Wuntch a respectful memorial service and reign Holt in when necessary. The three start by going to the funeral home, where they remove Holt’s initial decorations of balloons, party hats, and a poster that proclaims, “She’s dead!” Yet,

moments before the service is about to begin, Holt is approached by a man named Adam, who introduces himself as Wuntch's "one true nemesis" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 10:05).

Here, Holt is thrown into the second stage of grief: anger. When Diaz asks if Holt is jealous of Adam's rivalry with Wuntch, Holt says, "Of course I am. I despised her with my entire being, while she was only despising me with a fraction of hers?" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 11:26). He is enraged that there was "another man" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 11:43), and he angrily remarks, "I meant nothing to her. That cockroach Madeline was two-timing me... I wasted half of my life hating that duplicitous hag, and she didn't even have the decency to truly hate me back" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 12:50).

Wuntch and Holt may have been enemies, but as this moment reveals, Holt is now mourning her loss, as it means there's no more banter or bickering to spice up life as a captain and keep him on his toes. Furthermore, Holt is upset that Wuntch didn't seem to benefit from or enjoy their rivalry as much as he did, if there was another man who she deemed her "one true rival."

However, in an act of bargaining, Holt decides to team up with Adam and exact a final moment of revenge against Wuntch: Holt will give a nice speech at her memorial so as to not let her win by getting Holt kicked off the force. This act of revenge can be seen as bargaining: Holt enacts his plan, albeit subconsciously, under the belief that such revenge can somehow magically restore or bring back his relationship with Wuntch (Kübler-Ross, 1970). In other words, Holt is desperately trying to keep his rivalry with Wuntch alive by "winning" her funeral, despite the fact that there's nothing to win; she's gone, but Holt refuses to accept it. (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020)

Yet, as Holt gets up on stage to deliver the kind speech, Adam takes over the projector and plays a video of Holt reading his mean speech about Wuntch. As Holt races to turn off the video, he asks

Adam why he betrayed Holt. Adam reveals that he is Wuntch's nephew, and she sent him "to carry out the final phase of her master plan" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 17:17).

In a twist of events, however, Holt reveals that the current memorial was not real. As Holt explains: "I knew Wuntch had one final trick up her sleeve. I didn't know what it was, so I had to be prepared for anything. This whole thing is staged; none of these people are real mourners" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 17:19). He continues, remarking: "I have to hand it to you Adam, you almost fooled me. But no other man could possibly have what Wuntch and I had; we were star-crossed *haters*" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 17:43).

And with that, Holt enters depression. As he sits in the audience with Diaz and Santiago before the real memorial starts, he realizes that he'll never have to think of Wuntch again after the service is done, which makes him sad. When he's called up for his speech, Diaz asks Holt what he's going to say, and Holt decides that he'll "just be honest" (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 19:53). Immediately, Diaz and Santiago are concerned that Holt is going to ruin his career by disparaging Wuntch, but Holt has turned a corner. On stage, he delivers a succinct yet powerful speech:

As many of you know, Madeline and I were bitter rivals. But I've come to realize she held a special place in my life: no one challenged me like she did, or made me feel as alive. Our relationship was like an epic chess match, and it's hard to believe that... she'll never make another move... She is gone, and I wish she were not. I will miss you, Madeline Wuntch. (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020, 19:58)

Now, Holt has accepted her death. Though he remains sad, Holt knows that their never ending match is actually ending; there are no moves left to be made, and he will simply have to cherish the memories of all their previous standoffs. (Dweck & Scanlon, 2020)

In conclusion, despite the fact that Holt and Wuntch were rivals, he still mourned her loss and followed the Five Stages model. Therefore, the loss of someone, whether they were a loved one, a close friend, or—in this case—a “star-crossed hater,” is tumultuous, and the different ways in which one mourns them are all valid. Furthermore, this nontraditional representation of grief in media, especially in a show as light-hearted and amusing as *B99*, is incredibly important; it validates the experience of grief for a non-loved-one and, even within a popular theory of mourning, demonstrates that grief can be nonlinear and unpredictable.

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