A surreal landscape with a person on a staircase, framed by large, stylized human profiles. The scene is set in a dark, monochromatic environment with a light-colored staircase leading up to a bright, glowing light source. A small figure in a red shirt and dark pants stands on the stairs. The entire scene is framed by two large, stylized human profiles in shades of gray, one on the left and one on the right, facing each other. The background is a dark, textured surface.

DEMYSTIFYING GRIEF

Colin Campbell

I always believed, deep in my heart, that my life would just keep getting better and better. It certainly felt that way as I moved through my thirties and forties watching my kids blossom and my marriage strengthen. I discovered my calling as a father and teacher, and each year I felt more confident with who I was and my place in the world. I didn't believe in god, or fate, or karma, but I did have an unshakable belief that whatever challenges I might face, "it will all work out in the end." That belief went hand in hand with the idea that "when one door closes, another opens," and "everything happens for a reason." I was sure any obstacles that I might encounter along the way would, with the right attitude, turn out to be opportunities.

And then, on June 12, 2019, at 10:45 p.m. all those sweet, naïve beliefs were shattered when a drunk driver crashed into my car and killed my two beautiful, charming, witty, talented, brilliant and loving teenage children, Ruby and Hart. In an instant, my life would not ever "all work out in the end"; Ruby and Hart's deaths did not "happen for a reason"; and no more doors would ever open again for either of them.

When they were killed, I was lost. Without them, all of life felt meaningless. I didn't want to be alive without Ruby and Hart. I felt like a scared little boy, all alone in a terrifyingly empty world. I didn't know how I would stay sane. Reality was literally too terrible to believe. I was untethered from life. For the first few months, I wasn't sure if I would be able to go on living without losing my mind. The enormity of their deaths was so awful it couldn't fit in my head.

I had plunged down into uncharted terror and I desperately wanted guidance. So even though it was hard for my traumatized mind to focus on words, I devoured books about coping with grief. I read the memoirs and the self-help books, books written by grief counselors and therapists, and by people who had lost children of their own. They all offered some kernels of insight, some useful piece of advice about grieving or finding purpose. But they all also, at some point, disappointed me. They presented grieving as this very mysterious and private process that I had to figure out on my own. They were short on specifics about what it means to mourn. What are we actually supposed to be doing? All the books went on and on about the importance of sharing my grief, but there wasn't a lot of guidance on how exactly to do that. How do I talk about my grief in a way that my family and friends can understand? How do I not scare them off with the intensity of my pain and rage? These books offered very few concrete examples of how I was supposed to get through the day-to-day agony of profound loss.

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The first three years after Ruby and Hart's deaths were a brutal lesson in unwanted wisdom. In that time, I began to learn how to navigate my pain, lessen my suffering, combat my despair, access the love and support of my friends and family, and become even more connected to my wife. Most importantly, I learned how to hold close my thoughts, memories, and love of Ruby and Hart, without becoming completely overwhelmed by the pain and sadness of my grief. I am not a therapist, psychiatrist, or licensed grief counselor. I don't have a PhD in behavioral sciences. But I have journeyed with an open heart to some of the scariest, cruelest, darkest places of human suffering, and I have come back with some hard-won truths about grief that I believe are worth sharing. I have also gained wisdom from talking with friends I've met in grief groups and from reading an inordinate number of grief books. By offering up both my raw experiences and the stories and thoughts of my fellow travelers, I hope to help others who are struggling with their own losses, and also open a window onto grief, a taboo subject that is often kept hidden away out of fear and, sometimes, even a sense of shame. Here are a few things I've learned.

GRIEF DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A MYSTERY

The prevailing wisdom is that everyone's grief is unique, and each person processes their loss differently. Most therapists, grief experts, and books about grief all use the phrase "everyone grieves in their own way." This can be a comforting thought in that it protects us from any sense of judgment. It implies that there is no "incorrect" way to grieve; there is nothing in particular that we should or shouldn't be doing as we mourn. And on a certain level, that makes sense to me. I certainly don't want someone judging my grieving or telling me how I should be mourning.

But there is a downside to saying we all grieve in our own unique way. It turns grieving into a mysterious process that we all must figure out on our own. It's a cop-out. The unspoken message is that we can't know or talk about grief because it is too big for us—too unknowable. But that is not true. We who have lost loved ones know a lot about grief. Those of us who are journeying through it often find that by talking to other grievers we discover many shared experiences and needs. There is a commonality to our struggles. Ultimately, I don't believe we all grieve in our own unique ways. Counterintuitive as it may sound, I believe the fundamental process of grieving is the same for all of us.

We each might avoid our grief in our own unique ways (through denial, compartmentalization, avoidance, distraction, drinking, drugs, exercise, isolation, misery, violence), but when it comes to actively grieving and processing our loss, we all need to give words to our pain, and that begins by talking about our grief and our dead loved ones to other people. We need others to bear witness to our loss. Most every society on earth has some form of public display of grief, some public ritual of mourning in which the griever shares their feelings of loss to their community. In order to process and integrate our incomprehensible loss, we need to share our pain, and have it be witnessed and acknowledged.

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GRIEF IS A COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE

The other problem with the idea that we all mourn in our own unique way is that it ignores the reality that grief is a communal activity. When someone dies, they are not just mourned by their parents, or their spouse, or their children, or their siblings. A death is like an earthquake. There is the epicenter of loss, but then the grief extends out in rings of devastation. It is so important that the people at the epicenter of that loss are connected with all the people that have been rocked by the same loss. They are on a journey together. Their grief is shared.

Prior to my own loss, I mistakenly thought of grief as some strange process in which the mourner sinks into solitary overwhelming sadness for a while, until eventually they somehow manage to “snap out of it” and come back to life. I didn’t understand that grieving is an active process that one does with other people, even though that act of sharing can often hurt. Grieving involves making difficult choices, over and over again. Grieving involves repeatedly leaning into the pain, in spite of our fears.

TALKING ABOUT GRIEF

The need to articulate our feelings of loss is universal. And yet most people have no idea how to talk about grief, or what to say to the grieving. We don’t know what words to use, because we rarely encounter any role models in our popular culture. In almost every case, films, television, and books depict people in grief as stoically choking back their tears and walking away to privately console themselves. Again and again, characters will be shown avoiding their pain, running away from opportunities to talk to other people about their loss.

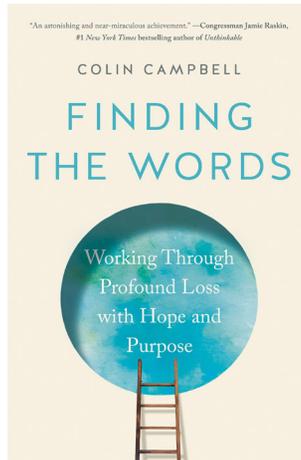
And as a result, people often assume that mourners should be left alone. So many of our friends and family have purposefully avoided talking to us about Ruby and Hart, because they were afraid of upsetting us. They worried that they might inadvertently trigger us, by reminding us of our loss. We had to explain to them all that they needn't worry, we were already triggered. We couldn't get more triggered. There was no moment in which we ever "forgot" that Ruby and Hart were dead.

THERE ARE WORDS

By far, the most common phrase that gets offered up as condolence to people in grief is "There are no words." We encountered this unhelpful phrase over and over again. It was shocking how often people would say it, or email it, or write it on their condolence cards. Apparently, somewhere along the line, our culture teaches us that this is a benign, acceptable response to grief. I understand the idea behind it. It is saying that your loss is so overwhelming and tragic, that no words are adequate to express my condolences. And for those who are frightened of saying the wrong words, it must seem like the safest of bets to excuse yourself from trying to say any words at all. Also, either subconsciously, or by design, it acts as a perfect conversation killer. It immediately ends any chance of a dialogue about grief. It's telling the mourner that we can't really discuss their grief because there are no words that would be applicable. This empty phrase encapsulates all that is wrong in how our society handles grief. We need words to process our grief, and if the rest of the world is telling us, literally, "there are no words," then we are going to struggle and feel alone and abandoned in our pain.

The truth is, most of us don't know how to behave toward the grieving. Before I lost Ruby and Hart, I certainly didn't know. If the situation were reversed and a good friend of mine had lost a child or sibling or spouse, I am sure I would have said "there are no words," and then hung back and waited for them to contact me, because I would have been too scared to reach out. And I am certain my fear would have caused us to drift apart. The problem is not with my friends but with our culture that doesn't provide any guidance. It seems clear to me now that if mourners are able to reach out and tell their circle of friends and family what they need and which words are helpful and which are hurtful, these mourners might be better able to hold on to more of their community. In fact, by sharing their needs, they would be contributing to the larger education of our culture. They would be leading by example and helping to demystify grief in the process. This situation is, of course, unfair. **The burden to reach out shouldn't fall on the shoulders of people grieving a terrible loss. We don't owe it to our community to educate them about grief. And yet, as challenging and unfair as it is, no one else can do it for us. And ultimately, I learned that the effort is worth it in the end, if it means we are able to get more support from the people in our lives.** 📖

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Colin Campbell is a writer and director for theater and film. He and his wife wrote and directed the short film *Seraglio*, which won Deauville's Grand Prix and was nominated for an Academy Award. His play *Golden Prospects* was nominated for five LA Weekly Theater Awards and was a Critics' Pick in *Time Out New York* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Campbell teaches screenwriting at Chapman University and theater at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. He has a BA from the University of Pennsylvania and an MFA from Columbia University. His solo performance piece titled *Grief: A One Man Shit-Show* premiered at the Hollywood Fringe Festival, where it won a Best of Broadwater Award.

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