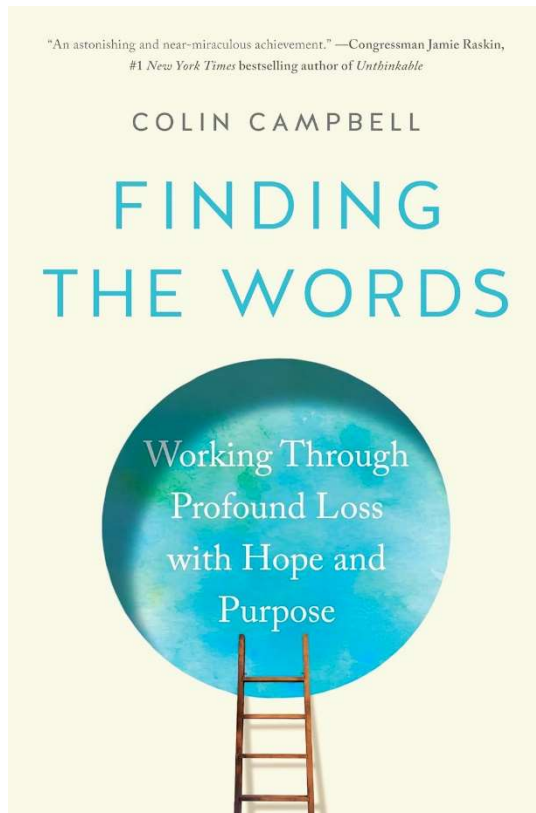


# ‘Finding the Words’ a reflective, deep chronicle worth reading

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“*Finding the Words: Working Through Profound Loss with Hope and Purpose*” by Colin Campbell. New York, NY: TarcherPerigee (an imprint of Penguin Random House), 2023, 304 pages, \$29.00 (hardcover).



“On June 8, 2019, while on a family vacation to Joshua Tree, we made an impulsive offer on a beautiful vacation home in the desert,” Colin Campbell explains near the beginning of “Finding the Words: Working Through Profound Loss with Hope and Purpose,” his heartfelt journey through one of the most devastating events that can occur in anyone’s life. “Every year since the kids were babies, we would hike in Joshua Tree National Park. And we suddenly decided to throw our usual financial caution to the winds and buy a place of our own. We were all taken by surprise at our boldness. Hart captured it best when he said, ‘Are we really doing this?!’ It felt to all four of us like we were entering a storybook period in our lives. We all started fantasizing about our wonderful future life, vacationing together in our favorite place.”

“And then four days later, on June 12, on a trip back to inspect our new vacation home, our storybook life ended,” he continues. “At 10:45 p.m., our car was hit by a drunk driver going forty miles above the highway speed limit. This driver had a prior DUI. She had failed to appear at court for a subsequent ticket for driving with

an open container of alcohol, and her license was suspended. That night, she was driving illegally, and drunk and high – no license, no insurance, and traveling at a recklessly high speed down a dark desert highway. Both Ruby and Hart were in the back seat, seat belts on. They were both killed instantly. One moment they were happily chatting away and in the next moment they were taken from us forever. We never saw the car coming.”

If you have ever lost someone you loved unexpectedly, you can instantly relate to the sense of meaninglessness and loss the author felt at that moment – and in all the moments since that tragic event changed his life – and that of his wife – forever. The questions, second-guessing, and the endless ‘what ifs’ that inevitably result when something shatters everything you believed in that gave your life a sense of permanence and coherence. Campbell covers in all in this excruciating yet ultimately comforting chronicle of coming to terms with unimaginable grief while somehow finding the courage to move forward.

When I was younger, I’d occasionally hear adults say things like, “Never wish time away, you never know how much you have,” and “Life is short, never take anything for granted.” Even at the small rural church where I grew up, I’d hear that “we are not guaranteed anything.” But those phrases really don’t mean anything until something happens that stops you dead in your tracks and

makes you see how fragile life really is. I am not sure I would have even read this book had it not been for the loss of our son in December 2023. Suddenly, however, Campbell's insightful and introspective prose makes perfect sense. It is obvious he wants to help those experiencing the pain that only comes through unanticipated loss.

Structurally, "Finding the Words" is comprised of ten chapters; the first nine deal with a specific aspect of the grieving process: "Fear," "Community," "Ritual," "Pain," "Denial," "Holidays," "Guilt," "Rage," and "Despair." He even includes a brief introduction prior to the initial chapter in which he describes how to get the most out of the book if you are using it to help you cope with loss. One of the features I found especially helpful was the inclusion of a set of "Actions" and "Journaling Prompts" at the end of each chapter in which Campbell shows how to use the information contained in that section in a productive and significant way. For instance, at the conclusion of the "Holidays" chapter, the author advises that you "design your own version of the next holiday," "find continuity in some traditions or rituals from your past," "allow yourself to cancel a holiday this year," and "allow yourself a vacation." Admittedly easier said than done in some cases, but I see the value in these recommendations.

The culminating chapter, "Meaning and Purpose" pulls everything together and provides the reader with a framework for making sense of what has happened and how it has impacted every aspect of life. What struck me about the narrative was the realism that Campbell brings to his comprehensive dissection of the universal emotional hurricane that anyone experiences when the unthinkable happens. The man knows his subject matter intimately and sincerely hopes that others can find solace and reassurance from the lessons he and his wife learned as they struggled to find a way to establish and maintain their new reality.

Campbell is a writer and director for theater and film who has taught Theater and/or Filmmaking at Chapman University, Loyola Marymount University, and Cal Poly Pomona University. He was nominated for an Academy Award for "*Seraglio*," a short film he wrote and directed with his wife, Gail Lerner. His one-man performance, "*Grief: A One Man ShitShow*," premiered at the Hollywood Fringe Festival where it won a Best of Broadwater Award. "Finding the Words" came to me through Eric Reed, a colleague at Western who also coordinates the local book reviews for the Daily News. He sent it to me after learning of the death of my son; I am glad he did.

Chapter Seven, "Guilt," was one that particularly resonated with me. I'm sure anyone who has experienced the loss of a close family member or other loved one can relate to the feelings that often accompany those who are left to "carry on."

"Survivor's guilt can take many forms and infect almost every aspect of our new lives," the author explains. "It can make it emotionally difficult to maintain basic levels of care, such as exercise and sleeping. Even the simple act of feeding ourselves can feel like a betrayal of the one who died. I can feel guilty for enjoying a beautiful sunset, or for taking a walk, or for enjoying a movie. I can feel guilty over doing something that I used to do with Ruby and Hart, and I can also feel guilty over doing something new that Ruby and Hart never got the chance to experience. I can feel guilty simply for surviving the crash when they did not."

As Campbell notes on his website, "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."

After making my way through this reflective and deeply moving chronicle that has so much personal meaning, I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*