

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST

with Ginger Campbell, MD

Episode #26

Interview with Sue Bailey and Carmen Flowers, Authors of *Grave Expectations: Planning the End Like There's No Tomorrow*

Aired February 27, 2009

[music]

INTRODUCTION

This is *Books and Ideas* Episode 26. I'm your host, Dr. Ginger Campbell. I want to welcome new listeners and welcome back my regular listeners. If you are new I will just mention that *Books and Ideas* is different from my other podcast, the *Brain Science Podcast*. I talk to scientists and writers about a wide variety of topics. You can learn more at booksandideas.com and you can reach me by email at docartemis@gmail.com.

Today we will be talking to Sue Bailey and Carmen Flowers about their new book, *Grave Expectations: Planning the End Like There's No Tomorrow*. This is a book about preparing for your own funeral or memorial service. I know that sounds kind of creepy, but I promise if you listen you will gain a new perspective on this topic. Even if you are too young to think about your own funeral, you no doubt have someone in your life that might benefit from this book.

Before I get into the interview I have to say something about my guests. While I have never met Sue Bailey, Carmen Flowers is the step-daughter of one of my closest friends, Juanzetta Flowers. During the interview Carmen talks quite a bit

about her father, Charlie Flowers. Dr. Flowers was one of my mentors in medical school, and he was married to Juanzetta for I think about 27 years.

Although I met Juanzetta once shortly after I graduated from medical school back in the 80's, we didn't become friends until after Dr. Flowers died. Fortunately I have had the opportunity to meet his daughter, Carmen, and her husband, Vern, several times when they have come down to Alabama for visits. That's how I happened to get a copy of *Grave Expectations* before its official release on January 20, 2009.

This interview was done on a Saturday and Carmen and Sue were both at Sue's apartment in New York City. It turned out that there wasn't enough band width for me to talk to them both over Skype at the same time so I ended up interviewing them separately, and unfortunately the sound for Sue's part of the interview breaks up quite a bit. I've tried to edit most of this out, but I've left the places in where I think you'll be able to guess the missing words.

[music]

I'm going to start out by playing the first part of my interview with Carmen. Carmen and I started out talking about her father.

[music]

CF: Did you know my father?

GC: I did. He was one of my mentors in medical school, although I ultimately decided not to become an obstetrician. I didn't realize he had retired as early as he did, and I think I was actually in one of the last classes that he taught. Because in my mind he was there many years after I left, but apparently he was actually retired. But he was one of the, I'd say, three attendings that I had in medical school that I consider role models. Your father—Charlie Flowers—Dr. Kurt

Niemann, and Dr. Ben Branscomb. I have to give these guys credit because we didn't get that many people that were good at both teaching medical students and showing how to interact with patients. He was a very special person.

CF: Yes, he was. And he had a really cool attitude towards death. My mother took her life, and her brother had taken his life. We had a lot of suicides in my mother's family. So, we started sort of young with that. And also we had tons of pets, and rats, and anything that he could take home that my mother would allow—except for the baboons—and so, we were always having funerals for pets. And Dad was very enthusiastic about all of it. And he planned his service very early. He was hunting with Gordon. Do you know Gordon?

GC: I don't think so.

CF: He was one of his residents. And he made a video. And this was probably 15 to 17 years ago. And he just talked about how he loved us, what he wanted to do, and what a good life he'd had, and every day was a gift, and things like that. And I guess he died probably five years later. And then, of course, he ended his life early.

But he and I sat up all night the night before he had decided to leave the hospital, and we planned his funeral—every single thing that he wanted, from which flowers he wanted in the garden to put on the table in the dining room, his Citadel sword, pictures of him with his parents, and then his period with my mother and us as children, and then ones with Juanzetta. And also the recipe—we had venison sausage and cheese garlic grits, and lots of Bourbon and lots of wine.

And we sat up all night, and finally there was nothing much more to talk about, so we watched a fishing show at about 4:30 in the morning. And then we brought him home, and we had some wine, and then he died. But what he gave to us in

doing this, essentially it was like following a recipe. We didn't have to think, 'Oh, would he like this?' or, 'Oh, are people going to be upset by this?' or whatever. It was delightful. I mean I worked in the garden; and just to start to put things together and know that this what he'd wanted.

And there was so much more laughter than there was crying during that time. And lots of friends came down. We had people sleeping on the sofa. I mean Juanzetta was wonderful. I have to say we laughed and cried and reminisced and ate lots, just the way he liked to live. And from that I thought, that's the way to do it is to plan it. I think people are so afraid of dying. And I talked to a lot of psychiatrists and they say really that at the root of most neuroses is this fear of death.

[music]

GC: *I will be back with the rest of Carmen's interview shortly, but first I'm going to play Sue's interview. Because I hadn't met Sue before I started out by asking her a bit about her years as a producer at HBO.*

GC: So, you worked at HBO as a producer for how many years?

SB: Well, I was at HBO 27 years and I was a producer like the last 23. I went into management at a certain point and the last 10 years I was a vice president there. I oversaw the promotion and marketing of the original series including comedy, and music, and sports, and documentaries.

GC: So, did you have any influence on what got made?

SB: No. It was on the promotion of the shows; although we did work with all the show producers, which was fun.

GC: Did you do any writing when you were working at HBO?

SB: Yes. I was a writer-producer and even as a manager you are writing all the time. So, that helped to hone my skills.

GC: Have you written any other books before *Grave Expectations*?

SB: No. I'd written stories and tried to complete things, but I hadn't until I worked with Carmen on this. So, it was great to work with Carmen.

GC: How did you and Carmen meet?

SB: I was Carmen's client. Carmen had an audio studio with some of the best engineers in the business, so HBO went there all the time. And we actually became best friends after she left the company, oddly enough. I guess because I wasn't a client anymore. We had a different relationship then.

GC: So, you guys are really close friends.

SB: Yes, very close. And we always say it's so unusual that the two of us could be put together with the same kind of sensibilities and beliefs and emotional kind of content. We're unusual people, so for the two of us to come together is really – we're always kind of amazed at it.

GC: Yes, it's so special when you meet somebody that's one of those kinds of friends where you really click in a way that you never thought you'd know somebody that you could click that way. So, one of the things that struck me about your book – why don't you give sort of a little bit of a description of what it is, for people that probably haven't heard about it yet.

SB: Well, it's a book that's ostensibly designed to help you plan your own funeral or memorial service. But Carmen and I always say there's kind of a secret mission that we have which is to help people get over their fear of death, and to just accept it as a part of life, and to include life in this final celebration of your

life, actually. And we like the idea that people are focusing on not just the morbid kind of dark sad things at the end of their life. That will happen, of course, but we want to include all of the life in the final send-off.

GC: Later on in the book you actually had the chapter called “The Rehearsal Dinner” where you suggested that people, if they had the opportunity, invite their family to come and be with them before they die. I think that’s great, because I know in the case of my father, although he didn’t die real close to when this happened, he had a close call where my sister and I were with him and were able to say our goodbyes. And then later when he died suddenly we were able to be OK with it because we had already had a chance to say our goodbyes.

SB: That’s a perfect illustration. Yes. I’ve thought about this with my mother who died of lung cancer; and they gave her three months to live, and it was almost exactly that amount of time. And I always thought it was kind of crazy; why are you going to pay your respects to the person after they’re gone? Why don’t you go and do it while they’re alive? And it gives you that opportunity for healing and resolution, perhaps.

It doesn’t mean it will happen. But Carmen and I always like to say the healing will happen; it’ll either happen before you die or after you die, so it might as well be before. And also there’s that whole issue of the last vision. If you’re doing a viewing people always say, ‘Ooh, I wish that wasn’t the last image I have of that person. I’d rather have seen them alive.’ Of course that’s also a great thing to do, but we just think why not try a rehearsal dinner. And if you feel well enough, celebrate it and get people around you.

We actually had this idea before we saw all the research on it. I’ve discovered these wonderful stories. There are people doing huge services. And the town gets involved, and sometimes they ask the town to donate money if they’re kind of a minor celebrity, and throw this big rehearsal party.

GC: One of the things you said in the book was we need to take hold of changing the tradition from putting all the emphasis on what you do after the person dies. It's not acceptable not to go to the funeral, but somehow people don't get upset if you don't go and see somebody when they're dying. And that seems kind of backwards.

SB: It is. And like we said – even in the book we say society kind of supports that, our culture supports that. If you go to your boss and say, 'My mom is going to die soon; I don't know when, but can I get the time off?' And it's like, 'Oh, I don't know.' And then once she's dead, 'Yes, go ahead and go.' And it's the same thing with the airline bereavement fares. You don't get it when they're sick and dying, you only get them after they're dead.

GC: My sister and I were actually able that time when my father had his close call, we actually did get some special fares from U.S. Air. We just called and told them what the situation was and I guess it was a case-by-case thing. So, it's not a blanket thing. I'd say don't be afraid to ask.

So, your book is written in a humorous style, which some people might find a little strange for a book about planning one's funeral. Although I don't know how you'd handle it otherwise. Did much thought go into the decision of the style of the book?

SB: Absolutely. Alice Peck encouraged us to use our voice. I think at first we were a little hesitant to include us in that kind of copy. She said, 'Your personality helps people to kind of get lost in this journey along the way. It's like you and Carmen take these people on a journey with such a great spirit that this is what you need in a book.'

And in fact if you read these other books there are a lot of funeral planners that came out since we wrote ours—or we started writing ours, I should say. When we

first researched this there were hardly any funeral planners and now there are quite a few. But we haven't seen one yet that includes this kind of spirit that we have, and the sense of humor, and this lightness. It's just so hard to get involved in those books, and it's like you get this kind of icky feeling. And it's like, 'I don't want to go there.' But Carmen and I wanted this to be an invitation to come along with us. And you have to be entertaining, I think, if someone wants to follow you.

GC: It's really designed somewhat like a workbook, with lots of place to write down thoughts as the person reads. That's an important element, too, isn't it?

SB: Yes. And you know, it's odd because we knew this before, but in writing the book we hear it more often, of course. But people said, 'You know I never asked them what they wanted to do with the body.' It's just a few words. Or, 'Do not resuscitate,' or, 'Where do you want to be buried?' It's simple questions. So, we thought well why don't we just have one place you can gather – even if you just do a few of those things, it's incredibly valuable to have that information right there.

The book is designed to just collect a few of these simple questions that are so easy to discuss but people don't. And in a way this book gives people an excuse to sit down and talk about these things. Even the basics, like what do you want to do with the body; where do you want to be buried; how much do you want to spend; would you rather spend money on a party or the coffin?

And then some of the beneficiary issues, some of the legal issues. We found that if you take it to a Notary Public it doesn't hold quite as much weight as having a Will done, but it actually goes much further than if you just told someone or wrote it down. And that's so simple, to have a Notary Public do it.

GC: You mean writing down your wishes about what you want done with your body, and so forth, and having that notarized? Just like you would a Living Will?

SB: Yes. So, it carries a lot more weight and it's very simple to do. So, we recommend that people do that. But if they don't that's fine. At least it's down there in the book.

GC: So, you would really recommend this book as something you could give to anybody of any age.

SB: Yes. Some religions don't allow for as much variety, shall we say, in planning the end. But I think it still has value for those simple questions about beneficiaries and the legal issues. And also I think there are always testimonials at memorial or funeral services, so in the early part of the book we have these questions that we ask people about memories about them—their best memories.

What they hoped to achieve in life; maybe what they didn't. Who would play you in a movie about you? What's your favorite saying? Your likes and your dislikes. That was designed on *Vanity Fair* interview questions, and also *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* interviews that they do. We hope it will become a real resource for people who are doing testimonials at services. They can use that information, and those stories, and those fun things.

GC: What's the most surprising thing that you learned when you were researching for this book?

SB: We're on a mission to get people to think about organ donation. We were shocked to find that out of like 2.4 million people who die every year, only 12,000 people donate their organs. And several thousand people die because of that situation. There are 100,000 people on waiting lists for organ transplants every year. So, it's like crazy. We say this is mass insanity. If you are going to do a traditional burial with a viewing, they take your organs out anyway, and a lot of times they put them in a little plastic bag at your feet in the coffin. And then when they cremate you the whole thing is just being burned up.

Well, think about it. Would you ever burn up a thousand Prada purses? No. Would you ever drive a Bentley into the ocean and let it rot? No. It's this incredibly valuable thing. If you just think of it as just something that's not a body, if you detach from that idea of an attachment to your body, then you think of it differently and you will give differently.

GC: Yes. I read this book—I think it was called *Nudge*—which was about how default choices affect people's behavior. And if you made organ donation the default—and not, not donating—something you made an active choice to do, that would make a tremendous difference. Because it's not that most people are opposed to it, but they just never get around to it.

SB: Well, apparently even if you say on your driver's license that you want to donate your organs it's not a legally binding thing. Your family can make whatever decision they want to about that. So often people don't know what their family member's decision was, and they are in an emotional state, and they're just like, 'Oh, no, I don't want to cut up my family member.' But they just have to think differently about it.

GC: Besides that particular mission what else would you like to accomplish with this book?

SB: What inspired this book is we were at this funeral that, as Carmen likes to say, it was just deadly. It was like, where's the life here? Where is the richness of this person's life? A person just isn't all sweet and happy all the time. There are disasters, and there are all these unusual things, and there's kind of quiriness. And so often that is not included in the service. It's like less than half of your life is expressed in this service; only the kind of either sad things or triumphant things—and there's everything in between that's not included.

So, that's why we want to encourage people to bring all of these different aspects of a person into the service. And what happens is it will totally transform the service. There will still be sadness but there will be happiness and laughter, and it is all about life. So, that's what we encourage and hope to achieve.

GC: I've been to both traditional funerals and memorial services that had creativity that included the whole person, and it really does make a huge, huge difference.

SB: It's very healing for everyone.

GC: By encouraging people to address these issues while they are alive, and even if they don't feel comfortable talking to their family at that point—although your book encourages it—if they write it down and make sure their family knows where it is, they have given them a gift to help them in that period later.

SB: It is a tremendous gift. People will just feel totally different and I think they will think of life and death differently just by that one act of changing the way we do a funeral.

GC: Would you say that it's fair to say that one of the themes of your book is that preparing ahead of time is a gift one could leave behind for your loved ones?

SB: Absolutely. I mean at the very least you get tremendous peace of mind, I think, that you've told your family this. And I think your family feels tremendous peace of mind if you do it before. Of course, even if they only know about it afterwards, they can just grieve and be together and reminisce and celebrate you without having to worry about all these practical details.

The popular notion is that in order to plan a funeral at the end it gives you something to think about other than your sorrow. But we don't agree with that at all. We think you need to be at peace with your family and not having to worry

and run around, and feeling guilty, or feeling stressed out, and feeling horrible about decisions—maybe that you might have made the wrong decision.

GC: Yes, you don't want your family worrying about whether or not they're doing what you wanted. You want them to know what you wanted.

SB: It's amazing: hardly anyone tells people in advance, but it really is so much easier, and so much better anyway.

GC: To me traditional funerals are just beyond unbearable. But I've been to a couple of memorial services and I'm grateful that my father's service was one of those that was truly meaningful. So, that's what drew me to talking to you guys about this book.

Your book is not just about the stuff that people normally think about. One of the things that you really encourage people to do in this book is to be creative. And you break it down into parts to make it easy for people to deal with it in a manageable way. Do you want to talk about some of the original ideas that you share in this book?

SB: Well, we encourage people to be original first of all in the venue. We say why don't you try going to a barn, or a movie theater, or a dock, or a botanical garden? Try something different. But we also say be creative in your music choices. For instance, I chose my music, and my dream would be to have live Japanese taiko drummers. I love Italian opera. I love Broadway show tunes, and the Bulgarian Women's Choir—which could not be live.

And I think the final song—which if anyone listens to it, I would encourage it—it's Louis Prima's, 'I Ain't Got Nobody,' which is one of the most joyous songs I've ever heard. And it's all about dying alone, being alone. It's a little crazy in terms of the lyrics, but you cannot be sad when you hear that song. So, I would love to have people hear that on the way out.

GC: You had a few hints in there for helping people get their mind going on the music, and you picked one of my favorite songs, which was ‘The Impossible Dream.’

SB: Music is so powerful for setting a mood. In this context it has very different meanings. It’s more powerful, perhaps. It just means something completely different; and since you have a captive audience. You know with so many MP3 players and all this media that’s so easy for everyone to have access to.

[music]

SB: We encourage people to record a goodbye letter and play it at the end of their funeral or memorial service—which is not done, but it’s actually very easy nowadays with MP3 players and iPods. We like to say why do suicide survivors get all the goodbye letters? That doesn’t make sense. And the power of your voice saying, ‘I love you,’ and thanking people for what they’ve done for you in your life. You know maybe you set some things right that weren’t, or maybe you apologize to someone that you feel like you’ve wronged. Or just talk about how wonderful your life was and how much you enjoyed being alive. That’s something that we really encourage people to do.

GC: If there’s one overall theme about your book, would it be fair to say that it’s about celebrating your life?

SB: Yes, it is. We give people ways of doing that, or methods of recreating that in a ceremony that I don’t think people do; or they haven’t been doing so far. Sometimes, occasionally.

GC: Yes. It’s just so much more meaningful when you’re going through something that you know was what the person specifically said that they wanted. I had a friend who died suddenly in a car accident, so no one got to say goodbye to her. But she was old enough that she had left behind exactly what she wanted.

She wanted to have a ceremony 40 days after she died, in the Buddhist tradition, and she had left all these specific instruction that made it possible for us to have a very meaningful ceremony. Whereas if she hadn't done that we would have just been left with the, 'I didn't get to say goodbye to her,' piece.

SB: Yes. The difference is amazing between the two ways of doing it.

GC: Well, thanks so much, Sue. It was great to get to meet you, sort of.

SB: Thanks for having us.

[music]

Before we listen to the rest of Carmen's interview I just want to take a moment to mention that *Books and Ideas* is sponsored by Audible.com. If you aren't already a member you can get a free audiobook download by going to audiblepodcast/booksandideas.

During my conversation with Sue we focused on the value of preparing for your funeral or memorial service ahead of time. I think that the most important thing to remember is that even if you aren't interested in your own funeral, if you leave instructions behind it really removes a burden from your loved ones. Instead of worrying about what you might have wanted, they can concentrate on remembering you and supporting one another.

In my conversation with Carmen some of the same ideas come up, but the focus shifts slightly to issues like what will happen to your body after you're gone. But I think you will see that the one thing they both share is the idea of celebrating life rather than fearing death.

[music]

CF: For Sue and me this life is not easy. Death is sort of the reward; we don't really fear it. But we also are just fascinated by the ways that people can go out – I mean I don't if you've read – have you read the book?

GC: Yes.

CF: So, you've seen all these different ways of what to do with the body.

GC: Yes, some things I'd never heard of before.

CF: It's wild isn't it?

GC: Yes.

CF: We love that. One of my new things is there's this woman, she's an artist and she makes pencils out of the carbon of the body. And there's built-in pencil sharpener, and so as you sharpen it the pieces of the pencil go into this box. And then when all the pencils are used the box becomes an urn for the carbon of the person. That's my new favorite thing that I want. It's actually a piece of art work, but we're thinking we might try to license it, because I just love it.

GC: It's an interesting form of recycling.

CF: Yes. And then you know the diamonds and coral reefs. I love the coral reefs. They're really actually rebuilding with the ashes and people's donations to get the coral reefs growing again and getting the ecosystem off of Florida back in shape.

GC: It's a shame we've gotten so far away from 'dust to dust', or back to the earth. Ever other form of life gives its elements back to the earth, and we try to hold on to ours for some strange reason.

CF: We do, we do. Well, you know the Civil War changed everything in the United States in the way that we bury our dead and take care of our dead.

GC: Was it related to the fact that there were just so many bodies to deal with?

CF: Absolutely. And that's when they began to embalm people, and because they had to send all these soldier's bodies back up from the Southern battlefields. And people were horrified. Everybody was horrified because it was against God's word. They were used to, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." There was an uprising, actually, that they were taking these kids and embalming them.

And the other interesting thing about it is that prior to the Civil War, if you look at older headstones there's lots of information on them about the person, and sayings, and who they loved, and their children, and whatever. Well, during the Civil War there wasn't time. They could just put the name, the date, and send it off, because there were so many bodies and so many deaths.

And now we're turning around certainly; green burial is the big thing now. Since we wrote this book last year, when we were working on it, it's probably tripled at least, maybe quadrupled, of the number of green burial cemeteries. And also traditional cemeteries are setting up areas for green burial as well.

GC: Now, your book is right now published only in the United States?

CF: No, actually it's available in the United States, Canada, U.K., Australia, India, Germany, and Italy.

GC: I ask because I have a lot of international listeners.

CF: Oh, good!

GC: So, you mentioned the Civil War. Do you know anything about the history of that in Europe as far as the burial practices?

CF: No, I don't, but I can sure look it up. That's an interesting thing that I've never thought about.

GC: Although most of my overseas listeners are either in the U.K. or Australia, I have a lot of European listeners also.

CF: It's interesting, in the United States they took a lot of the ways that the Victorians and Queen Victoria mourned. They didn't exactly do it the same way, but they sort of took some of her practices: the broaches that they wore and taking parts of their hair and putting it in lockets. And Americans sort of followed that in some way during that time. I have my grandmother's locket and it's got hair in it. It's interesting; I hadn't thought about the burial ways of Europe. Well, Europe, though, they're ahead of us.

GC: They're probably ahead of us on the green burial thing too.

CF: Right. Well, not necessarily with the green burial, although several places are using the heat from the crematorium to heat the church during services—which I really love.

GC: Yes, because it takes so much energy to cremate a body. That's kind of almost a paradox.

CF: Well, it's terrible. I mean ideally we will stop doing that because it's so polluting. And so are caskets. A lot of the funeral directors, though, are getting upset because they're not selling as many of these big caskets and the big liners that go in them. It was a lot of their income.

GC: Yes, I find the idea of a funeral home getting a bunch of money for doing all that kind of stuff very offensive myself. It doesn't seem to me like it helps anybody but the funeral home.

CF: Right, that's true. Although I was just talking to a friend of mine, and his father had died after a long, long illness where they were just waiting for him to go. And they went to their funeral parlor, and they were wonderful. He said, 'We just said we want Rent-a-Rabbi, etc, etc, etc,' and they just took care of it. And he said they made it so easy, it was the easiest part of this whole ordeal. And that's really what you want.

My Godmother actually planned her funeral down to every bit. And she died last year. And she had written down exactly how she wanted to be buried, where she wanted her ashes, and she did her whole service. She chose who would talk about each part of her life. Her brother was talking about when she was a young person. And then artists, from when she was older. She picked out all her music. She also wrote down exactly – she had been an artist and so she wanted which paintings, which illustrations, all the things that she wanted in the church that were scattered around, so that she could see it. And she wrote her own obituary. Again, it was so easy for us.

GC: So, how did *Grave Expectations* actually become a reality?

CF: You know we had talked about it a lot, and then we went to a funeral that was almost offensive, if you can say that. It was a friend of ours' parent. It was in a lovely church, but the preacher was very angry. She just was sort of mad at everybody. And they let people who didn't even know him just go up and talk extemporaneously. Some people would get up and go, 'I didn't know Mr. So-and-So but he was supposedly a nice man.' Well, this went on for maybe an hour-and-a-half. And you're thinking who's in charge here? The only good part about it was his fraternity brothers, and they sang A capella, and that was nice.

So, then we went for food, and apparently he was living down in the South and so he wanted Southern food. But we had to wait in line for 45 or 50 minutes to get to shake the hands of some relatives, and some people who thought they were relatives. And you just were holding places in the line to go to the bathroom. So, then when you got through that, then the food was bad. And there were no drinks.

On the way home we thought, we have to do something about this. That was the stimulus for it. We'd been talking about it for a long time, and we liked the topic. We liked death, we liked funerals. It's a part of life. It was four years from that funeral to this.

GC: Did you have problems selling the book to the publishers?

CF: Well, it languished in the hands of an agent one time, and she was sort of nuts and stuff. And we finally got a breakfast. Sue's next-door neighbor was doing a freelance job for Sterling Publishing, and she said, 'There's a guy that's interested in a funeral book.' So, we got on it, of course, and called him, and called. And finally he said, 'Well, I'll be in New York, let's have breakfast.' He said, 'I'm not looking to do this book for a year or so, but let's meet at least.' It was like three, three-and-a-half hours later, after he wrote everything out on the paper tablecloth, he said, 'We have to do this book.' And so, then we did it.

GC: And Sue was saying that since you wrote your book a bunch of other books have kind of jumped in. But yours is very unique. Do you want to talk a little bit about what makes yours different?

CF: To begin with, ours is humorous. It's humorous and it's full of fun facts throughout the book. You know there are all kinds of fun facts about death, and dying, and burying throughout the ages. Our publisher wants us to do a book of

those only, called *Deadtime Stories*. We're not judgmental whatsoever. We also give you places to write things down. We encourage people to do it with friends.

But I think we've also got a lot of fun – you know the changing that's happening; the way that they're getting rid of the bodies, which I love—Promession¹ right now. You know, making diamonds—and this is very popular now, making diamond jewelry out of the ashes, using the carbon again. Glassware. They're making lots of glassware with the ashes. And pottery. I also think for Vern that I'll have a little mug made and then I can drink my coffee and then when it's done I can see his face in the bottom.

GC: So, have you guys gone through the book—you and Vern—have you gone through the book and made your own plans for each other?

CF: Yes. But the problem with us is that we keep changing it because something new happens, or something all of a sudden becomes much more appealing. Right now we love promession. Are you familiar with promession?

GC: No. I had never heard of it before I read your book.

CF: You end up being pink powder.

GC: So, is it less energy intensive compared to cremating?

CF: Extremely. And also the green burials of just being buried in a shroud or a cardboard box that they paint and stuff, that's wonderful. And then generally in most of the cemeteries you have to get a GPS so that you can find your burial, because they let it grow up naturally. And people plant trees, and bushes, and things. But you can also have a wild green burial as well. We, of course, called them all and asked if you could bring your blender; and they said, oh sure.

¹ According to Wikipedia promession is “an ecologically-conscious method for disposing of human remains by freeze drying.”

GC: What's the most surprising thing you learned while you were working on this book?

CF: Well, I think one thing that I hadn't really thought about was how polluting the funeral industry is and how much air pollution happens. And most people think that they're doing the right thing. And, of course, the other thing, as Sue was talking about, the body donations. It's just insanity. How do you deal with them?

GC: Well, the problem is that—at least from my standpoint in the emergency room—the times when the bodies of the people in the emergency room who die are in the right condition for true organ donation are relatively limited. They can donate things like corneas. And I'm not entirely clear on when kidneys are good and when they're not. But I think, as Sue mentioned, the biggest problem is the families aren't necessarily receptive. So, that's a good example of why it's important to have your family know ahead of time that you want your organs donated if possible. I mean I had a patient once who was 95 years old and died of cancer, but she donated her corneas.

CF: Yes. Great!

GC: I'm not sure they will take 95-year-old corneas anymore—which I don't understand why they would have changed the rules. But even if all you do is donate your body to the medical school so that it can be studied – that's what I'm planning to do. But I can understand why that might be not a good choice for a lot of people. It kind of depends on your beliefs. And one of the great things about your book is that you make room for a wide variety of beliefs and wishes, and I like the way you give permission for people to do whatever feels right for them.

CF: Yes. Well, it's their life. It's so crazy not to do that. My Dad – did you go to his memorial service?

GC: No. Unfortunately I was not aware of it when it happened.

CF: Well, he had a big bowl with his ashes there and he had snack bags where people could come and take a spoonful or so, and take him with them; particularly if they were going some place good that he would like. And I loved that. It broke the ice, too. It was like at first people would be like, 'Oh, my God,' and then it was like, 'Oh, this is wonderful.'

GC: *Later on in the interview Carmen offered some suggestions about how you could apply this idea in a way that might be a little more socially acceptable to your average guest.*

CF: Have a little take-away bag. Like for me, I love Werther's. And you can just have a bowl of Werther's or something that people take—or wine, or little bags of things that make you remember the person that's gone; a golf ball, a tennis ball, a seed packet. Anything like that, that you can take away that's part of them—that you can plant, that you can play with, you can put it someplace. We really think that's a lovely gesture for people. And it's something that you need to plan before you die.

GC: Right. And you also suggested, related to that was the idea of having some sort of ritual as a part of the memorial service that involved that.

CF: Right. Like Dad did. Or like you put up photographs, or special rocks, or music even, or a picture of your favorite dogs and cats. Something that when you see it, it evokes a memory of you.

GC: My father had at his memorial service—and I don't know where this came from because I wasn't living near him—but he had this poster that looked like it

had come from his retirement party. He had worked for Boeing for 30 years or more, and it had various highlights from his career. I just loved that. It just made the service so memorable.

CF: Yes.

GC: I haven't been to that many funerals, and most of them I felt to be –

CF: Deadly?

GC: Yes. But my father's memorial service was wonderful. And we each got a chance to say something. So, I'm a big believer in that it makes a difference to have something at the end. That's what drew me to your book.

CF: And you're going to have so much sorrow after that, too. But it's sort of a celebration of life. And you know, there are people who are secretly planning their funerals. When we were first starting and doing research on this book we were at the checkout at Barnes and Noble and there was this Chinese girl, very young, who came and she said, 'Oh, I've planned my funeral.' And we said, 'Oh, great. Tell us about it.'

And she was so afraid that her mother was going to put her in that traditional white makeup and that she wouldn't look like herself, so she had gotten all of her makeup, what she wanted to wear, her fingernail polish, her shoes. And we thought, oh my God, this is happening—and that was four years ago—people were doing it in secret.

I think also it helps the people who are living. You know it's not easy getting through this world. There should be some sort of fun at the end of it—and laughter. And how many times do you go to funerals where there's not a lot of laughter? Sometimes it happens when you go home and everybody starts drinking and things like that. But life is complex, and it's a wild ride.

GC: Talk a little bit about what a person would get out of going through this book and thinking about this ahead of time—the person themselves. Obviously this is a gift you can leave for your family to make it easier for them to know what to do after you're gone in terms of what you wanted. But what do you get out of it?

CF: Well, it's all about me—you know, you don't have to please anybody else. And I think also in doing the book you find out a lot about yourself; things that you've been thinking about or not thinking about. We have people who've said, 'Oh my God, I've done a whole bunch of research on something,' or, 'This, I'd never thought it, and it's something that I love.' And sort of secret desires that people have that they were like, 'I'd be so embarrassed that anybody would know that I would want that.' But you know if you want like a big Afro wig, then do it; because everybody would go, and it might be shocking but probably everybody would have a great big laugh.

GC: It might be just what they need.

CF: Exactly. I think also people are giving it to their parents as well, that want their parents—or their good friends—to give them information so that they honor them. But I think it's interesting – I mean we're all going to die. We're all tied to this topic in some way or the other. And also the cool ways that people go out: fireworks, and balloons, and Tibetan sky funerals. Did you read about those—sky burials?

GC: Remind me.

CF: In Tibet they mourn the body and then they cut them up and they put them on top of a rock or something and then the vultures come and eat them. And so, they feel that they're returning their body and their nutrients and their life back

to the earth. It's a wonderful ceremony. We're actually going to try to shoot one of them when we do the show.

GC: You're making a show from the book?

CF: We've been asked to put together a show from the book, yes.

GC: How long has your book been out now?

CF: It's only been out since January 20th.

GC: So, you really haven't had a chance to gather any stories from people using the book, but probably by the time you make your show you'll have some.

CF: Yes. And on our website we're soliciting good stories for that. And we have a lot of stories just from the research that we did on this book.

GC: What's the website?

CF: The website is www.graveexpectations.net.

GC: OK. Well, I'll link to that in the Show Notes, don't worry. So, Carmen, is there anything else that you would like to share before we close?

CF: Well, what made you interested in this book?

GC: Well, like I said, I haven't had that much experience with funerals per se, but I certainly, being a physician, have been with enough people when they lost family members and seen what happens when they don't really know what the person wanted. The idea that you would go ahead and sit down and think about it and write it down so that your family and friends, or loved ones—whoever they

may be—if you know what the person wanted it makes all the difference in the world.

CF: Yes. And there's no time like the present, because you never know. But that's what gives us chills is that one little way—or one big way—of helping people through this crossing that we're all inevitably going to make.

GC: Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today, Carmen.

CF: Ginger, thanks so much. I appreciate all the time.

[music]

I want to thank Sue Bailey and Carmen Flowers for being guests on *Books and Ideas*. Their book is called *Grave Expectations: Planning the End Like There's No Tomorrow*. I think it could be an asset both to you and to those you love.

I want to take a moment to thank those of you who help support this podcast and the *Brain Science Podcast* with your donations. You can learn how to do this by going to gingercampbellmd.com. If you would like to tell me what you think about today's episode you can leave comments on my website at booksandideas.com or post in the Discussion Forum at brainscienceforum.com. You can also send me email at docartemis@gmail.com.

There will be another episode of the *Brain Science Podcast* out in a couple of weeks, and the next episode of *Books and Ideas* will be out around the fourth Friday in March.

Thanks again for listening. I look forward to talking to you again very soon.

[music]

Theme music for *Books and Ideas* is “The Open Door” by Beatnik Turtle. Be sure to visit their website at beatnikturtle.com.

[music]

Books and Ideas is copyright 2009 Virginia Campbell MD. You can copy this podcast to share it with others, but for any other uses or derivatives please contact me at docartemis@gmail.com.

[music]

Transcribed by [Lori Wolfson](#)
All errors or omissions responsibility of the transcriber