

A N E X C L U S I V E E X C E R P T

“Engaging, no-nonsense, and challenges conventional thinking.”

—SARAH KNIGHT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Life-Changing Magic of Not Giving a F\*ck*

# UNFOLLOW YOUR PASSION

HOW TO CREATE A  
LIFE THAT MATTERS

to you

**TERRI TRESPICIO**

## CHAPTER 1

# *How to Unsubscribe from Other People's Agendas*

*If you drink much from a bottle marked "poison" it is  
certain to disagree with you sooner or later.*

—Lewis Carroll

Once upon a time, we were told what to think, what to do, what to swallow—whether we wanted to or not. Whether we liked it or not. And these things got into our bodies, our digestion, our DNA—ideas about who we were, who we could be, who's in charge. They grew in and around our very cells, so much so that it became difficult to tell what other people thought and believed from what we did. That's where influence won over independence, where fear won over freedom. And only by taking a good hard look at what we have swallowed can we begin to find our way out of the sometimes brutal, often well-intentioned, ways of thinking and seeing, and begin to tell the difference between what people want for us and what we want for ourselves.

Your life is not one big leap; it's a series of steps. Each one is an incremental move that determines your direction, the

overall arc. Sometimes you know exactly where you want to go; other times you're nudged, encouraged, or railroaded. And while some steps are bold and definitive, others are trickier and require a degree of compromise to balance what you want, what others need, and where you draw a line. There's always a chance to course correct, but you can't adjust what you can't see.

Right now you might be at a crossroads, feeling pulled in two different directions, stalled out or stuck or spinning your wheels. Sometimes you'll take almost any advice, anything to dislodge the fear, worry, hesitation, and in some cases you may even be willing to do what someone else thinks just because it's better than nothing. Been there. There's plenty of you-go-girl advice, telling you just to follow your dreams and fuck everyone else. Oh, but if it were only that easy. Easy advice to give, but not easy to execute.

That's why we're not going to begin by burning whole cities to the ground here. We begin by questioning what we've been told and sold, check our sources. Do a full-on review of all the crap we've perhaps unwittingly subscribed to, which has the inbox of our brains teeming with lousy or ill-fitting advice. What *have* we been listening to, consuming, believing—and why?

So let's go back to the beginning: To the first time you did something, not because you wanted to, but because you were compelled. Because someone *expected* you to. You know the moment because it's where you . . . paused. Hesitated. Where the world slowed to a heavy tick and the ground started to separate beneath you and you had to choose a side: Go this way or that way. You decide you want to do the right thing, but you realize that sometimes what is supposed to be right doesn't feel right at all.

What I remember is that I was seven years old and bored. It was one of the straggly last days of summer, and I was, as my mother calls it, at loose ends.

"Why don't you go see if Leah is home," she said. It wasn't a question. Leah Pompeo lived a few doors down from me. She

was a little thing but brassy and bold and never took no for an answer. I didn't want to play with her, or anyone.

Against my will or better judgment, I found myself knocking on the dark double doors at 11 Montrose Avenue, then admitted to the dark, air-conditioned foyer.

It wouldn't be the first time I did something because someone said I should do it. Sometimes you're glad you went against the grain of your own inclination, did something you might not otherwise do. But other times you resent being yanked along on the strings of other people's suggestions. And yet you do it anyway.

Leah came to the door wearing a tank top that tied into bows at the shoulder and led me to her bedroom, where we played with her half-dressed Barbie dolls. Then a button came loose from her elaborate bedspread. She picked it up and held it out to me in her chubby little hand, her sparkly pink nail polish chipped and bitten.

"Eat it."

While it might have looked like candy—shiny, round, red—I knew it wasn't.

"Eat it? Can you even eat this?"

When people in positions of power say things, it doesn't matter if they're true.

I wanted to believe her, that she had an edible bedspread, like the candy necklaces we wore around our necks and chewed at. You could be a necklace and candy, so couldn't you be a button and candy? Maybe.

Earlier that spring, I'd received the Eucharist for the first time. Holy Communion is the first sacrament you're really conscious for (I'm not counting baptism, which was very nearly like being waterboarded by a stranger holding a crucifix, and I'm glad I don't remember it).

What you're taught as a Catholic is that the Holy Eucharist isn't a *symbol* of Jesus; it *is* Jesus. I was almost afraid to chew it; I let it alight on my tongue like a butterfly. I wondered if I was different now that I had put God in my mouth. The day you

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receive this sacrament is the day you're given a seat at the adult table. You, too, get to swallow it whole.

I didn't understand how something could be two things at the same time: A body *and* bread, Christ *and* a cracker, a sacred thing *and* store-bought. There was what I was told and what my body knew to be true; I was taught not to trust my senses, but what someone said to believe. If you swallowed that idea, if you told yourself your body was not to be trusted, would you be able to trust it when you needed to?

Leah looked at me hard. Her mother called from the bottom of the stairs; Leah ignored her. The cherry-red button was rigid between my fingers. My face and neck flushed with an anxious heat. I put the button in my mouth and bit down, feeling the plastic crack against my teeth. It tasted like what it was, some kind of polymer.

Every religion or ritual you can think of involves swallowing *something*—unleavened bread, a sip of wine, a promise of abstinence. Or worse. Boys growing up as a member of the Mardudjara Aborigines of Australia undergo circumcision—and then are required to swallow their own foreskins. While it may be morbid, at least you're consuming something of your own.

The problem is that we're so often swallowing things that other people hand us: Their pointy opinions, hardened ideas, homemade beliefs they think would be good for you. But also: Ideas about you and what your life should be that simply aren't and don't have to be true. Hard-and-fast rules about how one should or should not behave, flavorless notions about who you can or can't be.

And sometimes it really is easier to swallow it, and maybe you cough it up later or it just sits there like a brick of lasagna in your gut and doesn't move. Take it from someone with a finicky digestion; I've learned the hard way what happens when you swallow the wrong things, even when they're seemingly harmless.

The question is, what are the consequences of swallowing things that you were given? Maybe it was easy going down and

then the digestive turmoil hit later. Or it was really tough to swallow and you were glad you did (pride, for instance, comes to mind).

But think about this for a sec; think about all the things you're given and told to swallow that you (and I, and everyone else) swallow at some point, usually early. Beliefs about whether or when you should: Get a job, get a certain kind of job, make money, make a certain amount of money; fall in love (as if one can plan such a thing); get married, have children. Even when, left to your own devices, you wouldn't have considered such a thing. It's worth thinking about the fact that ideas you have about what your life should be aren't always hard rules but leaked in from movies and songs and images you liked, things people said around you.

Every kid has resisted swallowing a thing, sat there staring at a cold plate of food that they don't want to eat and won't, until they're dismissed with despair from the table. Maybe you think it's rude not to eat what's in front of you. But something in me also roots for the kid who holds strong to that boundary of what's going in and what isn't.

I felt the jagged pieces of button scrape their way down my throat, where they would get passed through each phase of digestion, each organ shrugging it along to the next.

"I want to go home."

"You can't," she said, raking a bubblegum-pink Goody hair-brush through her long brown hair.

"Yes I can."

"No, you can't." She slapped the brush down on the bed. "And if you try, I'm going to push you into that big pile of dog poop on the street."

I thought of my mother, five houses away, measuring rice into the rice cooker, sorting the silverware with the phone tucked under her chin, the kitchen soon filling with a sweet jasmine steam.

It was time to take Leah's dolls for a walk. When I saw my opening, I took it, slipping through a wall of bushes like a secret

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agent, stealing up my driveway, pounding the stairs, slamming the door where my mom was now filing paperwork, and throwing myself against it.

My mother swiveled her office chair in my direction. Her hair had started going gray in high school, but in 1980 it was called frosted, which meant she did it on purpose. “Who on earth are you running from?”

“Leah.”

“Leah?” She laughed a little, shuffled a stack of papers before laying them back down on the desk. “Why did you need to run?”

“She might not have let me go.”

My mother sat up straight and looked at me the way you do when you realize the person you’re talking to is missing a critical step in logic and you must bridge the gap carefully.

“They can’t *keep* you,” she said. “You do know that, right?”

It sounded like the most obvious fact in the world once you heard it, like seeing how a trick is done, the hole in the back, the set of springs. I had all the information but still was not sure I believed it.

After all, people kept things that didn’t belong to them all the time. They even kept other people. Years later I’d hear about a man who kidnapped a woman and locked her in a shed for years. She bore his children. They made a movie about it.

“I belong to you, don’t I?” I asked my mother the next morning as she worked a comb through a challenging knot in my hair.

“I’m your mother. But you don’t belong to me, or anyone. That’s not how it works.”

I had hoped that if I belonged to my mother I couldn’t belong to someone else, that it was the belonging that kept me safe. But this wasn’t even true. I don’t know if I fully appreciated how critical a message that was, especially given that so many other people (mothers, spouses, lovers, cult leaders) have attempted to prove the opposite to so many women: *You are mine. I get to say what you do or don’t do.* What it told me, in ways



that had only begun to hatch, was that whether you want to be with someone or not was not the same as being possessed by them. Being safe and being sovereign were two different things. And no one could keep you safe.

I would be surprised if someone coerced you into swallowing a button off a bedspread (and yet part of me wouldn't be surprised), but you likely swallowed something along the way. Something you shouldn't. We all have.

But there was more than one moment in your life when you agreed to something you didn't necessarily believe or want to believe, or do, or take on. But you did. I did. Do you remember when that was for you? Was it a standoff between you and a pot roast? Was it what you wore or didn't want to wear? An assumption some asshole made about you that raised every hair on your neck? You might have wanted to just keep the peace and not make a fuss, or maybe you wanted to please or impress or join the club. Maybe it was way worse than that.

Swallowing is an act of trust, of acceptance, and of compliance. We do it for a lot of reasons, and I don't blame you for any of it. It's easier to swallow a thing than put up the fight, and even then sometimes you need to be taught to do it. I couldn't swallow pills until I was eleven. I had a mental block against it; the idea terrified me, to swallow something whole.

Your life and mine have been filled with people telling us, explicitly and implicitly, to say yes to things we wouldn't otherwise choose. To accept invitations we don't want, to say yes to people we neither like nor trust. We will have our own reasons for doing it, and sometimes they don't match. Maybe it's not that it's such a great opportunity or even a good idea, but sometimes we end up complicit because being complicit seems more important. No one can make you do things; you can only choose to go along. And that decision depends on what's worth risking.

Perhaps the most important thing, the most valuable thing, is to know what you're swallowing (what you keep swallowing) and why. To recognize that this awareness is the only way to be

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radically alive, rather than pretend that you can subsist on buttons, because you cannot.

I never had to play with Leah again after that incident. But I thought about it years, even decades, later, not without some shame. Because this wasn't "done" to me; I participated. Swallowing is a commitment that only you can make. No one can do it for you.

It's worth taking a good hard look at that boundary between what the world wants and you want and, well, making sure it's intact for one, but also that, regardless of what you decide to do, you know that it was a request you either granted or you didn't.

The goal here as we move forward is to keep bringing us back to this fact: That you are a sovereign person with the choice to do or not do—with your body, your mind, your soul. I'm certainly not interested in judging you, and rationalizing why we did what we did, if you ask me, is a waste of our very precious time. Because the mind is funny that way, and brilliant—it will make up incredibly sound reasons for what we did after the fact so it can remind itself it's still in charge. I don't care about excuses, and neither should you.

What you decide to take on, do, believe, swallow, has an effect on what you do next. And if you let your "executive function" run the whole show and your ego take credit, oh forget it. You'll be awash in horrible corporate memos on your brain's boring letterhead to explain to you Why We're Doing Things This Way. And fact is, all the reasoning in the world can't hold a candle to the moment your body tightens up around a thing and says no.

If you want to know what you "should" be doing, well, join the club. But the should is a made-up vision board that your ego threw together for reasons that serve only itself.

We've been taught to swallow all kinds of beliefs we never thought to question—including what's worth pursuing and what isn't, what job you should or shouldn't take, that you should hurry up and settle down before you're too old or unlovable. Who's saying that? And why would we take their word for it?

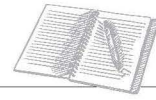
Think of this as a detox diet: You remove a bunch of foods and then, one at a time, start adding them back in, so that you can focus on how each one makes you feel. When you've swallowed so much it's hard to know what's what. So it's worth tuning in to the kinds of things we swallow every day. Pay attention to what the body, *your* body, is telling you. That's the first step of breaking free.

#### **Gut Check: Some Things You May Have Swallowed**

- A romantic relationship (or five) that someone else wanted more than you did
- The idea that you need a romantic relationship right now
- The idea that you need a romantic relationship later, ever, or forever
- A marriage
- A major
- A job
- An industry
- An invitation
- An apartment
- A whole house
- A product that you don't want, need, or enjoy
- The idea that you should look a certain way
- The idea that you should be doing certain things
- The idea that you should behave a certain way
- A trip you didn't want to take
- A compliment
- A flat-out insult
- A veiled threat
- A rule that doesn't, or never did, apply
- The notion that because you're "good" at a thing you should do it
- Someone else's life, or what appears to be someone else's life
- A goal someone thinks you should aim for
- An amount of money someone thinks you should earn

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## write your next chapter



**OK! So here's your first prompt.** Now if I were sitting there with you, I'd have you close your eyes and just rest for a moment. Climb out of the vaulted ceiling of your brain and down into your body so that you can write *from* your body, where your instincts and imagination and memories also live. Think of your feet, your fingers, the large muscles of your legs, the delicate structure of your spine rising out of the pelvis and arcing up toward the top office where you spend a lot of (too much) time.

You don't have to write an essay here, or worry about grammar or spelling. You're not preparing a document. You're simply going to uncap a pen or let your fingers alight on the keys and write whatever comes to mind when I give you this prompt. Whatever beautiful or horrible or nonsensical or ordinary thing. Just write and watch what unfolds. Follow it like a rabbit into the grass. See what happens.

**Think about something you swallowed.** Literal or figurative. Start with the concrete, as that is always easier to start with. Where you are, what is on your fork, your plate, your tongue. Your mind. Set a timer for ten minutes. Something you swallowed. Start writing.

*grab a notebook*

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How was that? How did it feel to just write without worrying at all for a few minutes? Did the memory that surfaced surprise you? Upset you? Make you laugh? All of that is totally and completely fine. This, by the way, is all part of a specific approach toward creative work that I'll talk about later. Suffice it to say, the idea here is that throughout this book, you don't just wave at me and my stories on the page, but join me there, and actually write part of this chapter too—the most important part: *your* part.

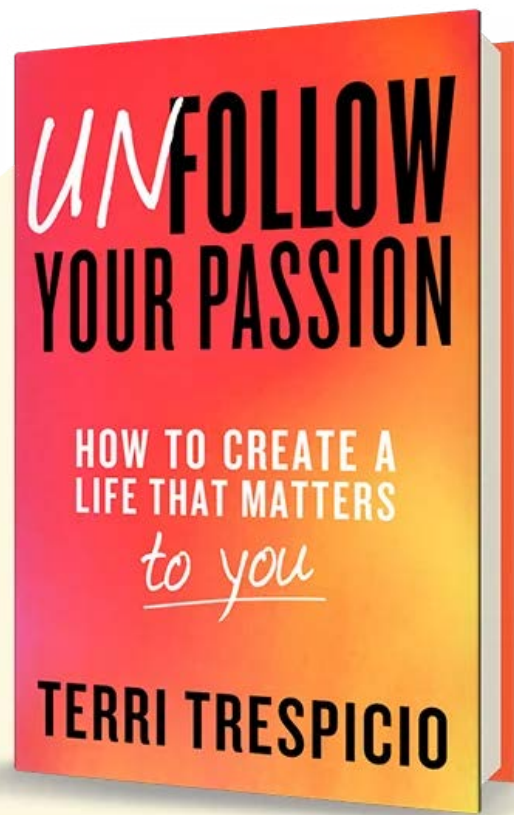
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