

Also by Shari Caudron

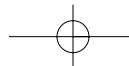
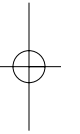
*What Really Happened:  
Unexpected Insights From Life's Uncomfortable Moments*



# *Who Are You People?*

*A Personal Journey Into the Heart of  
Fanatical Passion in America*

**SHARI CAUDRON**



**INTRODUCTION**

# *Topless in the Woods*

*"I'm the chairman of the bored, I'm a lengthy monologue,  
I'm livin' like a dog, I'm bored."*

*—Iggy Pop*

**WHEN I WAS TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD I DECIDED TO TAKE** up black-and-white photography. I bought a Pentax single-lens reflex, rented darkroom space at the San Francisco Art Institute, and began to take long, watchful walks throughout the city. Pentax in hand, a scowl on my face, I scoured the streets for revealing city images. The crumpled newspaper in a grimy alley. The empty bottle under a park bench.

The weight of the camera felt good in my hands. I was a Photographer. I wore an oversized jacket, green fatigues with lots of pockets, and I smoked.

I was earnest, artistic, and totally consumed by photography.

For about five months.

Two years later, I hooked up with a group of pagan, Mother-Earth, goddess-worshipping feminists. I became a vegetarian. I bought Tarot Cards. I attended week-long festivals in Yosemite National Park with topless "womyn" who chanted, wore crystals, believed in past lives, and ate an alarming amount of tempeh.

12

—

As did I.

I

For about a year.

N

T

R

O

D

U

C

T

I

O

N

When my metaphysical musings came to an end, I became—what else?—a runner. I gave up smoking and began to carbo-load. I trained and entered a triathlon. I learned about shin splints, drafting, electrolytes, potassium, runner's high, lactic acid, pronation, and sand-bagging. I was a diligent convert to the world of the fit and entered races at least once a month.

The racing phase easily outdistanced the photography and metaphysical phases.

It lasted two whole years.

Months passed, seasons changed, and so did my roster of activities. For the next several years, I dabbled in backpacking, Buddhism, Scrabble, snowshoeing, bridge, belly dancing, golf, gardening, fencing, piano, and an abundant amount of non-professional, highly unstructured wine tasting. The operative word is dabbled. Through all these years, through all these hobbies, nothing ever took hold and swelled into a grand, all-consuming, get-a-load-of-this obsession. I once started a collection of antique Roseville pottery and actually managed to acquire six pieces before losing half to a lover when our relationship ended. Of the three pieces that remained, one was chipped and worth maybe twelve dollars. See, I was never good at this sort of thing. I got bored easily. Plus, I always thought zealots were a bit strange. I once attended a slide show given by an avid rock collector who described various pieces of her collection as “droolers” and “show-offs.” After advancing to a slide of a rock with dazzling purple crystals, the collector slumped back in her chair. The light from the projector cast a warm glow on her thick glasses and curly hair.

“Oooohhh,” she said, hand to her heart. “This baby could win a pageant.”

Afterward, I invited friends to stone me to death if I ever got like that.

13

—

But truth be known, I admired the rock collector. She had something I didn't—passion. A passion so deep she was never at a loss for what to do with her weekends. A passion so consuming, she just *had* to share it with others. A passion so meaningful and enriching, she burned to excite in others her love of droolers, quartz, and feldspar.

Me, all I had were three pieces of chipped pottery and some memories of running topless in the woods with a crystal around my neck.

Given my history, I hadn't the faintest notion what it was like to love a single hobby or activity so much that I would plan all my spare time around it. And once I hit forty, once I was no longer obsessed with finding a job, snaring a mate or buying a house—I'd done all that, sometimes more than once—I began to want more.

I wanted to find something that I wouldn't, *couldn't*, get bored with. I wanted a grand, ferocious, larger-than-life fervor that knew no bounds. I wanted to love diamonds like Elizabeth Taylor or cooking like Julia Child. But I wasn't like these larger-than-life women with their over-the-top interests. I was more like MaryAnn on *Gilligan's Island*. You know. Nice. Temperate. Vanilla.

Because of this, I began to sense that something may have been holding me back. Sure, maybe I hadn't hit on the right activity. Nude volleyball had yet to be tested. But I started thinking there might be more to it. That something *else* had been preventing me from committing myself more thoroughly to an interest. But what? What had been standing in my way? I set out to learn the answer.

I began by asking friends about their deeply held delights.

“What hobbies do you have that you really, really love?” I asked my friend Lezah, who'd previously traveled with me into the worlds of Zen Buddhism and art appreciation.

“Well...I love golf,” she said. “And horses. But I'm not

T

O

P

L

E

S

S

I

N

T

H

E

W

O

O

D

S

14

— intense about either one. Well, I could be. Maybe not. I'm not sure."

**I** I moved on to Dennis, my best friend since high school.  
**N** "Dennis, what do you really, really love in life?"

**T** "Duck liver pâté," he said.

**R** Clearly, I needed to broaden my search.

**O** Over the next few weeks, I conducted an informal straw  
**D** poll among friends and acquaintances asking them what deeply  
**U** held interests they possessed. Their responses surprised me. Not  
**C** because they were so varied, but because they weren't. Few of the  
**T** well-educated, middle-class professionals in my peer group  
**I** could name a singular, all-consuming interest. With one notable  
**O** exception—my partner, Angela.  
**N**

Angela and I had been together ten years at that point, and every day of those ten years her list of interests had remained the same: our dog, other dogs, dog shows, dog books, and the Dallas Cowboys. Oh—and dog sledding. *Especially* dog sledding. She'd read Every Single Book Ever Written about dog sledding across arctic tundra, including one called *My Lead Dog Was a Lesbian*, a title I tried not to take personally. In her own way, Angela was not unlike the rock collector: she knew what she liked, liked what she knew, and felt no need to go searching for other ways to spend time.

But me, I was a searcher. I was searching for some kind of silly, shameless joy, something to give my life color and dimension, something I could go gaga over and not care that people actually used the word gaga when describing me. And based on my research, so were a lot of other people. Although relieved to know I wasn't alone, I was also alarmed. Why didn't more people I know engage their interests so thoroughly?

Years ago, Harvard professor Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, presented an abundance of evidence pointing to the steady decline in civic participation in American life. According to his research, Americans were increasingly less like-