Contents

INTRODUCTION

Call Me a Quitter (but Not Too Loudly, Please)

Throw in the towel,
Raise the white flag,
Put your tail between your legs.
A sobriety coin,
A divorce decree,
A tipped over chess king.
Roberto Durán says "no más" in the eighth round,
Liz Carmouche submits in the first round of an Ultimate Fighting Championship title match,
Simone Biles withdraws from the US gymnastics team.
On the deck of the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, 1945,
On the rooftop of the American embassy in Saigon, 1975,
On the tarmac of the Kabul airport, 2021.
Edward VIII abdicates as king of England in 1936,
Richard Nixon resigns as US president in 1974,
Mikhail Gorbachev steps down as president of the USSR in 1991.
Saint Paul converts to Christianity (Tom Cruise converts to Scientology 1,953 years later),
Condoleezza Rice abandons the Democratic party for the Republicans,

https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646428076.c000c

Mike Pence switches from being a Catholic Democrat to an evangelical Republican.

CEOs of Amazon, McDonald's, Peloton and Twitter bail,

Presidents of Harvard, Columbia, MIT, and Dartmouth resign,

And . . .

since June of 2021, more than 4 million Americans have quit their jobs every month in what's been called "The Great Resignation."[1]

What are we to make of these historic and contemporary quitters—are they courageous or cowardly, virtuous or weak, savvy or lazy, admirable or despicable?

FIGURE 0.1. The Japanese surrender to Allied forces in World War II, aboard the USS *Missouri*, on September 2, 1945. Courtesy of the Naval Historical Center via Wikimedia Commons.

WHY ME? BOOK SMARTS, STREET SMARTS

A reader might well wonder whether I am a qualified guide into the world of quitting. While nobody has a doctorate in quitting (completing such a degree would be oxymoronic), I would suggest that I have the diverse credentials to plausibly undertake this interdisciplinary project. As a scientist-turned-philosopher at the University of Wyoming, I have the academic grounding for such an eclectic venture.

On the science side, I have studied animal behavior (mostly insects) and evolution (such as insecticide resistance) for many years. Insofar as quitting is an evolved behavior and humans are animals, I have the background to be a quitologist (not really a word).

On the philosophical side, I have worked extensively in the realms of environmental ethics and philosophy of science. As such, I've critically analyzed complex concepts such as our duties to future generations, the role of perspective in assertions of truth, and how political power is used to censor free speech. While quitting might initially seem conceptually straightforward, we'll soon see that it is a wondrous tangle of ideas.

How did a fellow with a doctorate in entomology become a professor of natural sciences and humanities, teaching courses such as natural resource justice, environmental aesthetics, and ecofeminism? Well, by quitting. Or at least through a metamorphosis. Some insects exhibit complete metamorphosis (e.g., a caterpillar becomes a butterfly), while others exhibit incomplete metamorphosis (e.g., a cockroach nymph repeatedly molts until it incrementally becomes an adult). My journey was more like the latter transformation, but there was a point at which I quit teaching courses such as insect anatomy and physiology, seeking grants for scientific research, mentoring graduate students in the sciences, and writing papers for research journals. Instead, I began delving not into the workings of nature but into the nature of knowledge, truth, goodness, and beauty.

But even if I have a foot in the worlds of both science and philosophy, a skeptic might say that to be a trustworthy guide through the thickets of quitting, practical experience is as important as an academic back-

ground. Who would want an expedition leader who studied maps but never trekked the countryside?

As a practitioner of quitting, my bona fides are solid if not exceptional. To be honest, I've ironically persevered in the sorts of endeavors that are commonly quit in the United States. I've never divorced, having been married since 1982. And I've worked for the same employer for thirty-nine years while switching departments internally and entertaining job offers at other institutions. And I admit to having unaccountably persevered in a plan to read 1,000 books between my fiftieth and sixty-fifth birthdays (the only book I came very close to abandoning was James Joyce's *Ulysses*).

With regard to my experiences of quitting, I began in my childhood by giving up on Santa Claus in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. A memorably defiant quit in a rather demanding household was declaring that I was done with piano lessons. I became a modestly competent judoka as a teen but chose to pursue other ventures after advancing to the stage of being able to use choke holds, which meant learning when and how to submit (i.e., to quit). I had long dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, but I abandoned that plan while in college. During those years, I quit smoking pot after an acute panic attack, and I abandoned Catholicism after developing chronic skepticism. I've quit various secular organizations—everything from social action groups to a fantasy baseball league. I resigned as the director of creative writing after students vociferously doubted my alignment with their political causes. And like any other writer, I've euthanized many essays and stories, some during gestation and others after growing decrepit. Now that I'm half-retired (semi-quit), I might give up book-length projects after this one. Perhaps the most difficult quit in many ways was giving up on a grueling climb in Rocky Mountain National Park with my wife and son a few years ago, which meant admitting that I couldn't do things my younger self had done with ease.

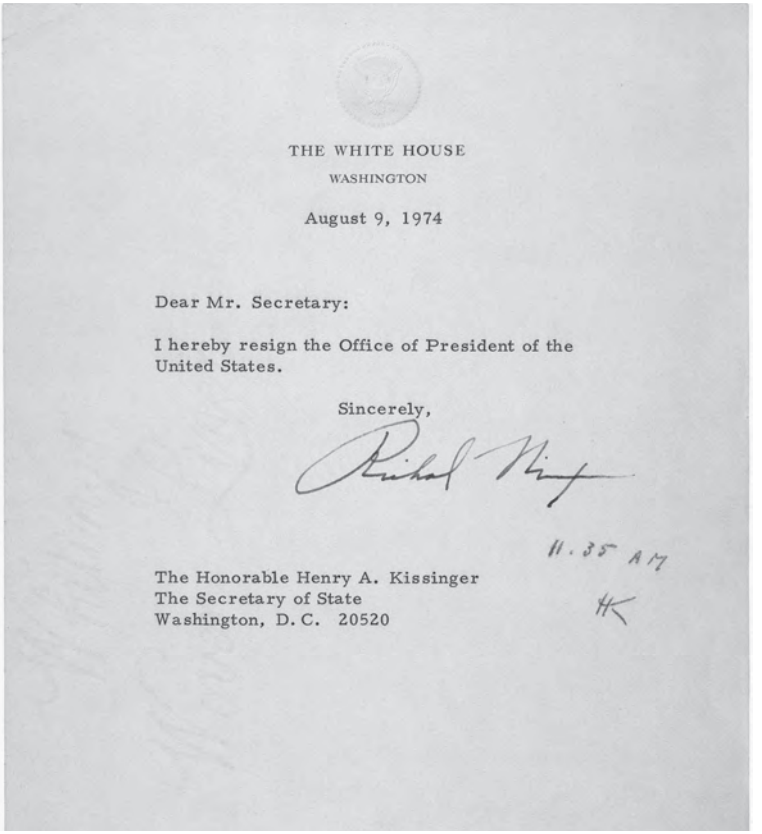
Like others, I've had my share of vicarious experiences of quitting, with friends who have gone through messy divorces, ended addictions, and attempted suicides. Some years ago, a dear friend declared that he

was quitting life as a man and transitioning to being a woman. And after my mother moved into an assisted living facility, I watched her struggle with dementia until she mentally surrendered but lived several months before her body consented to call it quits.

COPULATING, DYING, AND QUITTING: TABOOS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

Few decisions are as crucial to defining one's life, expressing one's values, or creating one's identity as quitting. Sure, the things we begin are important, as are those we endure and complete. However, many of these beginnings (e.g., a new job, relationship, or religion) are preceded by endings. Other quits are crucial to our selfhood simply by virtue of what is ended (e.g., renouncing citizenship, surrendering in battle, forsaking alcohol, rejecting meat, or choosing hospice). When thinking about how severing accretions from our lives shapes who we are, I'm reminded of the apocryphal answer Michelangelo supposedly gave when asked how he sculpted the famed statue *David*: "I just chipped off all the stone that didn't look like David."[2]

Despite its vital contribution to shaping our identity, quitting is typically viewed as a shameful act—and surely some, perhaps many, quits diminish our character through betrayal, cowardice, or laziness. We create euphemisms for those aspects of our lives that we avoid directly discussing in polite company, such as sexual intercourse (e.g., making love and rolling in the hay), urination (e.g., relieving oneself and answering nature's call), and death (e.g., passing away and meeting one's Maker). The same holds for quitting. Consider ending relationships, in which we: break up, go our separate ways, take things in a different direction, and (my favorite) consciously uncouple. But we avoid saying that we quit. The exception might be the line from *Brokeback Mountain* when Ennis tells his lover, "I wish I knew how to quit you."[3] But even here, the feeling is that of a man wanting to end an addiction—a socially sanctioned quit.



THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 9, 1974

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States.

Sincerely,

Richard Nixon

11.35 AM

The Honorable Henry A. Kissinger
The Secretary of State
Washington, D. C. 20520

HK

FIGURE 0.2. Resignation letter of President Richard M. Nixon following the Watergate scandal. Courtesy of US National Archives via Wikimedia Commons.

Any number of famous people have disparaged quitting. There is, however, a tendency of talking the talk of this being an ignominious path but not walking the walk. To be charitable, perhaps it can be said that if one isn't sometimes a hypocrite, then one doesn't have very high standards or lacks the capacity for critical self-reflection.

From the world of power and politics, a year after he resigned the presidency, without evident irony Richard Nixon asserted that "a man is not finished when he's defeated. He's finished when he quits."[4] Although Douglas MacArthur proclaimed that "Americans never quit,"[5] when

his views on military funding conflicted with those of President Roosevelt, MacArthur offered to resign as chief of staff of the United States Army—a seemingly un-American lack of true grit.[6]

The archetypal setting for disreputable quitting might well be athletic competition, in which individuals are encouraged to persevere as evidence of their character. Sports exemplify the high-profile, two-faced condemnation of quitting. Mike Ditka—who played professional football and coached the Chicago Bears to a Super Bowl victory—famously said "you're never a loser until you quit trying."[7] However, after twelve years of a difficult marriage, Ditka quit trying and divorced his first wife.[8] Jack Nicklaus, who won the Masters six times, admonished "resolve never to quit, never to give up, no matter what the situation"—apparently forgetting that he quit college to play professional golf.[9]

Female athletes also staunchly but speciously advocate perseverance, at least when it comes to their professional lives. Billie Jean King declared that "champions keep playing until they get it right."[10] But this courageous woman quit college, a marriage, a pregnancy, the consumption of meat, and a conservative Methodist upbringing.[11] While these might all be defensible, even admirable, decisions, they are forms of giving up. Likewise, Chris Evert pronounced "you can't give up! If you give up, you're like everybody else,"[12] but she gave up on three marriages, becoming like a million other people who divorce annually (although most don't quit three times).[13]

Women's tennis serves as a lens into our culture's growing ambiguity with regard to quitting. The conventional condemnation of those who don't persist in the face of difficulty has recently been challenged. The world's highest-paid female athlete from 2020 through 2022, Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka, withdrew from the French Open in 2021 citing her struggles with depression and anxiety.[14] And less than a year later, the top-ranked women's tennis player, Ashleigh Barty, announced that she was emotionally spent and was quitting the sport.[15] While some have called these women courageous, others have criticized them as pusillanimous, emotional snowflakes. A cultural critic contended that cowardice had become the new courage: "We are now in the age where it

is more admirable not to try. More heroic to quit."[16] It seems that in the culture war over what constitutes a virtue, quitting is a new battlefield.

From a psychosocial perspective, the negativity associated with quitting arises, at least in part, from the fact that any behavior becomes more readily performed with repetition. In positive terms, if you want to be a public speaker, then join a local chapter of Toastmasters. If you want to be a writer, then, in the words of legendary author Stephen King, "you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot."[17] Or as the old joke goes: A fellow seeking to attend a concert in New York City spots a guy carrying a violin case and asks him how to get to Carnegie Hall, and the musician replies, "practice, practice, practice." We sense that the same can be said for vices and bad habits.

Conventional wisdom has it that one becomes a quitter through giving up repeatedly until quitting develops into a lifelong habit. Perhaps this character flaw begins with the individual trying to preempt the humiliation of losing a competition (being a loser may be the only opprobrium worse than being a quitter), and giving up becomes easier with each new occasion and context. First, the person throws in the towel during an amateur boxing match, then gives up on learning a new language, then resigns from a difficult job, and then leaves a spouse during a rocky patch in their marriage—nothing is too small or large to quit when the going gets tough.

Turning back to the development of laudable habits such as practicing the violin, in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contended that steadfast repetition is how one cultivates the virtues—a view supported by modern neuroscience.[18] But does the well-practiced musician find it merely less stressful to play the instrument, or do they become more skilled—and can one cultivate a kind of virtuosity when it comes to quitting?

LET NATURE BE YOUR TEACHER (OR NOT)

Shifting to a brief consideration of how we might understand quitting in biological terms—and why we might be well-prepared to perceive this behavior negatively—a case can be made that evolution favors

persistence. A disposition for quitting may well have been a significant disadvantage in our past. Those individuals who gave up easily in the pursuit of food would not have fared well. After all, the animals we hunted had undergone natural selection to persevere with regard to resisting predators by flight and fight. Their quitters became our dinners. And our quitters became hungry hominids and perhaps meals for persistent, fierce carnivores.

A similar line of analysis would apply to acquiring mates. Those males and females who didn't persist in the seeking of a partner (or two or three, for those who were particularly unwilling to quit) didn't leave many offspring. This isn't to say that there is a "quitting gene," but there are surely psychological dispositions that are heritable, and it's not unreasonable to posit that gritty parents might have produced resolute offspring through both nature and nurture.

While the acquisition of resources would have entailed protracted struggle, a foolhardy persistence was costly. After repeatedly losing fights for dominance or territory, pursuing further conflict would only produce more wounds and fewer offspring. And, as we'll see, the practical challenge in the modern world is not so different. Knowing when to get off the canvas and when to throw in the towel—literally and metaphorically—is a difficult decision that doesn't neatly reduce to simple cost-benefit analysis given the incommensurable stakes of one's happiness, safety, wealth, and identity.

While we can posit that prehistoric quitters were destined to hunger and celibacy, scholars hold contradictory views as to whether persevering is in our nature. Some psychologists confidently assert "we now know that persistence is hardwired in the human species,"[19] while others maintain that "persistence requires overcoming the natural tendency to quit."[20] Even other species are inscrutable. While some evidence suggests that birds readily quit an unproductive task,[21] other studies report that our primate cousins don't seem adept at quitting when persistence continues to yield suboptimal results.[22]

We'll explore this stick-or-quit tension in much greater depth, but it's easy to appreciate both sides of the argument even at a personal level. On the one hand, we see ourselves and others as often acting with bullheaded persistence. We wonder why we stuck with a miserable job for so many years or why our friend wouldn't leave a dysfunctional relationship. Why are kids admonished to "hang in there" with piano lessons, math assignments, and athletic endeavors if doing so is an innate inclination? If we are truly hardwired to persist, US culture wouldn't need to have constructed a mythology of perseverance,[23] and there shouldn't be a market for children's books that encourage the little ones to "think they can" along with an anthropomorphized little engine[24] or for young adult books that valorize Katniss and her tenacity amid the Hunger Games.[25]

On the other hand, we find it easy to give up on a challenging puzzle, and my professorial colleagues shake their heads at how readily students withdraw from courses. But if quitting comes so easily, then why are there so many self-help books devoted to instructing people how to abandon various commitments? There is a cottage industry of "experts" advocating that we quit unfulfilling endeavors with advice such as "evaluate whether you might want to quit your good job in pursuit of a better one, leave your comfortable city and move to one with even bigger opportunities, and separate from a relationship that's pleasant but not inspiring or supportive of your dreams."[26]

So, is quitting a moral failing that needs to be overcome or a virtuous practice that needs to be cultivated? Which self-help general's battle plan should we select from the "grit-versus-quit lit" bookshelf?[27] Is it a psychobiological compulsion or a cultural creation? Should we opt for narcissistic quitting or Sisyphean persevering? Maybe the question is not that simple.

FOR EVERY SIMPLE QUESTION . . .

To paraphrase the inimitable social critic H. L. Mencken: For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.[28] And when it comes to understanding the complex nature of quitting,

there are three central problems that we'll explore in this book. For each, the solution will be complicated—not intractable or unassailable but appropriately challenging. I say "appropriately" because truly important problems of life rarely yield clear solutions. We wouldn't expect that an exploration of faith, justice, wisdom, or courage would be a simple journey, and the same holds for quitting.

In section 1, I begin with an investigation of quitting as a sociobiological phenomenon. The approach here is a voyage of discovery in which we explore the remarkably diverse forms quitting can take. I think of this as akin to an expedition I pursued with a colleague to collect insects in Amazonia for research and teaching purposes. We set up various traps to capture as many different crawling and flying creatures as possible so as to sample the full range of entomological diversity. After picking out specimens of research value for ourselves, we used the bulk of the material in our teaching laboratory and had students sort through the jumbled bodies and develop classification schemes based on patterns of insect anatomy (even to the inexperienced eye, beetles are distinct from flies, which differ markedly from ants). As for this anthropological expedition into the nature of quitting, after gathering marvelously varied accounts and organizing these observations systematically, the next challenge is to make sense of their essential features.

In section 2, I test out various hypotheses of what these diverse cases—ranging from military surrender, to mixed martial arts submission, to addiction withdrawal, to political resignation, to marital divorce, to religious conversion, to suicidal acts—have in common. Is there a fundamental nature that they all share? The shift from concrete cases to abstract concepts is crucial because without such a move, all we have is a series of psychosocial museum drawers filled with marvelous specimens of quitting and no deep or useful understanding. Famed physicist Ernest Rutherford arrogantly asserted that "all the science is either physics or stamp collecting."[29] To be charitable, he meant that without theory, a scientist has only a catalog of observations. And so, I'll attempt to derive a unified definition of quitting—a conceptual framework informed by

the sciences (animal behavior, anthropology, economics, evolutionary biology, psychology, and sociology).

Section 3 is the payoff. Here I tackle the question that is likely to be most important and relevant to readers: What makes for a good quit? But, of course, we couldn't attempt a plausible answer unless we had already developed some conceptual grasp of quitting, just as we can't figure out what makes for good dances, fair fights, or justified lying without understanding what is meant by dancing, fighting, and lying. Figuring out the essence of a virtuous quit will entail delving into why, what, when, and how to give up. The reader should be warned, however, that there are no self-help, pop-psychology guidelines for the simple-minded. Rather, this is a book that respects the reader's intelligence and willingness to struggle with the truly important questions of life. One will not find easy answers, but one might discover how to ask better questions, including one of the most important and difficult decisions we make: Should I quit?

Before setting off on our voyage of discovery into the nature of quitting, it's necessary to provide a few caveats regarding the nature of this adventure. Most essentially, my concern is with the individual. There is surely much to be said for a more sociological approach to quitting in which we'd explore higher-level questions of how humans collectively prohibit, permit, or encourage quitting in a constellation of social contexts. But a journey is unlikely to get very far if every interesting detour is explored. I'm reminded of taking walks with my two-year-old granddaughter, which don't get much beyond the driveway if we pause to examine every intriguing flower, insect, and rock. That said, there will be some opportunities to at least broach questions such as whether our society is prone to quitting too readily or too reluctantly.

In focusing primarily on the individual, I'll mostly avoid the temptation to wander down the rabbit hole of cross-cultural analysis. There's no doubt that different cultures have different standards and practices when it comes to quitting. For example, the divorce rate in Maldives is twice that of Denmark, which is four times that of Qatar,[30] and the

suicide rate in Lesotho is triple that of Russia, which is forty times higher than Barbados.[31] These sociological patterns are important to understand, but their complicated explanations would take us too far afield for the most part.

I'll also tread lightly through the thicket of gender, which is every bit as portentous and contentious as that of culture. In Western societies, quitting is typically viewed as weak and arguably associated with femininity. This gives rise to any number of complicated issues, such as the impression that women are judged more harshly than men when it comes to resigning from political office but not when seeking divorce. Interestingly, economic data suggest that women who quit their employment during "the Great Resignation" fared better in the job market than men who quit[32]—a phenomenon that combines gender and socioeconomics, which can be further complicated by taking into account whether quitting is a financial privilege.[33] All of this exemplifies why I'll largely avoid any attempt to explore the sociocultural aspects of quitting beyond what is necessary to inform our understanding at the individual level.

Finally, I should reiterate an important warning given in the preface (given how few people read prefaces, myself included). This project may disappoint those who have devoted their professional lives to delving ever more deeply and narrowly into their chosen fields. I have no objection to such dedication, and I genuinely admire many of those who have doggedly pursued such lines of inquiry (e.g., a colleague who spent more than fifty years studying the biology of Wyoming grasshoppers and made major contributions to entomology through his diligent investigations). However, such singularity of focus is not the only means of learning or teaching, notwithstanding contrary views among some of my academic associates. I'm reminded of this opposition by virtue of a reader's report provided during the early phase of this book's development, in which the very honest, if intellectually insular, commentator wrote: "I should state my bias against reading or writing academic books that are not in my area . . . I must say that I do not know in what field this manuscript intends to contribute" (the reader specialized in the subfield of employee turnover, which is surely an important, if rather narrow, concentration).

In a sense, a thoroughgoing grasp of quitting potentially contributes to virtually every field in the arts and humanities as well as the medical, behavioral, social, and natural sciences—but only if the specialist is able and willing to engage in intellectual extrapolation and creative curiosity. Perhaps one might think of an exploration of quitting as an exemplary case of transdisciplinary research that integrates traditional fields in a holistic manner.[34]

In the most immediate, personal, and practical terms, your having read this far leads to the question: Will you quit this book before completing it? For my part, I was tempted at times to quit writing; something like 97 percent of people who start to write a book never finish it.[35] As for readers, only about one-third claim to always finish what they start, while one in six give up in the first fifty pages.[36] Here's some balanced, perhaps even sage, advice from a comedy writer and avid reader: "Not enjoying that book you're reading? Quit. It's okay. You're allowed to do it. Just quit . . . I am not saying you shouldn't persist with a book because it's difficult at first. Sometimes overcoming that initial struggle is what makes a story beautiful."[37]

Should we be taking advice from a comedian? Sure. Notwithstanding my claim to scholarly competence, the quality of an argument is not necessarily a function of one's professional credentials (I'd also contend that comedians tend to be really smart people). Recall that the likes of Richard Nixon and Douglas MacArthur—public figures with significant gravitas—both vilified and instantiated quitting. Or perhaps we should consider the nuanced wisdom of Taylor Swift, a music icon who tweeted this insight: "Giving up doesn't always mean you're weak. Sometimes you're just strong enough to let go."[38] What does a country-turned-pop singer know about character compared to the likes of a president and a general? Perhaps a great deal, as we shall see.