

<chapter-title>INTRODUCTION

<quote>“Progress is impossible without change; and those you cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

<quote-attribution>George Bernard Shaw

As an innovation and creativity consultant, I one thousand percent believe this to be true. I spend my days working with clients who want to change their mindsets, skills, behaviors, and organizational systems and cultures to better embrace and adapt to change.

My journey to doing the work that I do is inextricably tied to my love for quitting and quitting stories. I counsel clients on pivoting (thinking, products, services, etc...) but what is perhaps the biggest pivot you can make? A hard quit. A “No more, thanks.” “Never again.” “Been there, done that.” I am giddy every time I can help a client get to the mindset of “Who cares if that’s how we’ve always done it? That’s not how we are going to do it anymore.”

To quit is to change your mind; hence quitting is progress toward the new.

Quitting stories were even a part of me starting my business. During the ritualistic “let’s compare career trajectories” small talk that is endemic to Washington DC -- where I lived at the time -- I vividly recall stopping people every time they said something along the lines of “Oh and then I transitioned out of that job and then I...” or “Then I left that city and then I...” I would say “Whoa wait, back up! Tell me more about why you left that job/city?” I found that this was a way to really get to know someone at a deeper level than just their resume or chronological history. I heard stories of leaving jobs because of not feeling respected, for more money, or due to family pressure. I heard stories of uprooting lives and leaving cities for reasons big and small. By asking

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people “Why?” I learned a lot about their values, belief systems, and what was important to them. I learned about what they were willing to put up with or not put up with. From these stories, as well as my own quitting experiences, I began to view quitting as not something “losers” do and not as “giving up” but rather as making a life choice and making *progress*.

I may love a good quitting story now (enough to fill an entire book with them). But I wasn't always so quick to change or question things myself.

I was one of those (probably irritating) “achievers” growing up — not only in every club, but leader/president of it, class president and then Student Council president, homecoming queen, choral leader, lead in the senior musical, etc...you get it. You are probably nauseated by it and I don't blame you. My beloved high school guidance counselor, Mr. Cusick, once half-jokingly said I reminded him of Tracey Flick, the devastatingly aspirational high school student Reese Witherspoon played in the movie *Election*. Yeah, I got the reference; on top of everything, this super-achiever also had a part-time job at Hollywood Video. I was in on the joke. Mr. Cusick was my high school tennis coach for a bit too — I wasn't even good at tennis but I never quit it.

Bottom line — I was a joiner. A do-er. Someone whose word mattered. I took my commitments seriously. I wasn't a quitter.

It's what we all learn: you can't be a quitter *and* a high-achiever.

But in college, I quit something that would impact the rest of my life.

I grew up a comedy nerd and so when I got to college in New York City, I immediately applied for internships available at all of the late night talk shows. My sophomore year, I got an internship at *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*! It was at *Late Night* where a fellow intern a couple years older than me suggested that I take an improv class at the theatre where she was a student. “I think you're really funny. I think you'd like it,” she said. Ever susceptible to flattery and

believing what others saw in me before I did, I signed up for an eight-week improv class with the same teacher that had taught her.

I went to the first class and was pretty immediately uncomfortable. I remember doing a two-person scene with a young, offbeat high school kid; he initiated a scene with me by clucking like a chicken and flapping his arms. I froze. I was uncomfortable. I had no idea how to respond, despite the instructor’s gentle prodding that literally any response was a good one. After a long, awkward wait while the whole class waited for me to do something, anything, I blurted out “I’m going to eat you!” to my classmate the chicken. I was baaaad at improv. Not because of what I said, but because of how long it took me to unfreeze in the face of ambiguity. I left that first class and never went back. I quit improv.

I regretted it immediately and for years afterward. I continuously wondered “What if I hadn’t quit? Would I have loved it? Would I be writing for a comedy show right now?” With the benefit of growing up, gaining hindsight, and — mainly — becoming less of an annoying achieving perfectionist, I realized a few things about this quit and the “Tracey Flick” I was at age twenty:

<numbered1>I was used to being good at things

<numbered1>I was used to being good at things because I was carefully selecting and opting in to only things that I knew I had a good chance of success in. I rarely truly challenged myself.

<numbered1>I wasn’t good at improv.

<numbered1>NO ONE IS GOOD AT IMPROV RIGHT AWAY! Or even for, like, the first five years after they start doing it!

<numbered1>I wondered what would have happened if I’d just gone back to the next week’s class. I now know that I would have learned that NO ONE IS GOOD AT IMPROV RIGHT AWAY!

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<numbered1>I was afraid of learning I was bad at something that might have been important to my career aspirations at the time. Being bad at something wasn’t fun for me. So I just chose not to learn anything about it or myself at all.

<numbered1>I still wanted to do improv.

This was a BAD quit. It permitted me to stay in my comfort zone of achieving for the sake of achieving, and put off the big life decisions that would allow me to curate my life (those came later and are referenced below).

After eight years of regret and wondering “what if?”, and with the benefit of some *good* quits during those years, I wanted to get the monkey off my back: I signed up for an improv class. I remember sitting in a circle with the other students at the very first class, each of us awkwardly perched in the brightly colored, child-size chairs that were in the preschool classroom the improv theatre rented. The teacher, himself six years younger than me, asked us all to introduce ourselves and say why we signed up for the class. When my turn came, I said I had signed up “to settle an old, emotional score with myself.”

This was the start of a now ten-years long devotion to long form improv comedy. Turns out I loved it. I even loved it when I was bad at it, which was and is often. I not only went back to that same theatre in New York and took that class, I took all the others they offered. Improv is even a big part of my innovation and creativity work now. I “un-did” this bad quit.

The reason why I share this example of a bad quit to introduce a book about stories of people who *don’t* regret quitting things in their lives is, because even though I quit improv on my first try, I learned so much about myself in processing why I quit and why I regretted it so deeply.

What we quit is a reflection of ourselves; the reasons why we quit teach us a lot about who we are and who want to become.

So why do we resist quitting - change and progress - so much in our lives?

We all were raised to view quitting as a failure of character. Whether it was from youth sports, or not being allowed to quit piano lessons, or even eyebrows raising when you announced you were not, in fact, going to continue with your economics major when you were just two classes away from getting it, we all know that quitting is bad.

Our society has a lot to say about quitting. Just Google “quitting quotes” and oh my god, you will soon learn just how oppressive it is out there/here for us all. This is just a sampling:

<bullets1>“Pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever,” (Lance Armstrong. Are you really going to take quitting advice from an infamous cheater?)

<bullets1>“If you quit once, it becomes a habit. Never quit.” (Michael Jordan)

<bullets1>“It’s always too soon to quit.” (Vincent Norman Peale)

<bullets1>“Age wrinkles the body; quitting wrinkles the soul.” (Douglas MacArthur!)

<bullets1>“Quitting is the easiest thing to do.” (Robert Kiyosaki)

And then there’s the granddaddy of them all: “Quitters never win, and winners never quit” by Napoleon Hill. Countless people, especially Americans, have been brought up with this cross-stitch-on-a-pillow worthy philosophy from this self-help author who was once also deemed “The most famous con man you’ve probably never heard of.” From the time we are children, we are inculcated into a culture that equates reliability, character, commitment, and self-respect with not quitting.

Not quitting doesn’t imply there is anything in its place — it’s just the absence of something, the absence of a choice, really. We’ve grown up in a world that glorifies “sticking it out” as a path to success or to the equally undefined “winning.”

If there is one thing I’ve learned in writing this book and interviewing people about their quitting stories, it’s that the decision to quit and the reasons to do it are 100% individual and personal.

Case in point: I recently was interviewed about this book for a podcast and I shared this formative story of mine about quitting improv and regretting it. Turns out the host had also quit improv in college! But for her, it was one of the best decisions she ever made. “[Quitting improv] was the right thing for me. It was horrible. I fucking hated it. And it’s part of what made me embrace that I was meant to be a lawyer.” She never looked back, had zero regrets. We both quit the exact same thing at the same time in our lives and had entirely different conclusions about it. Mine was a bad quit, hers was one of the best quits of her life.

This is why this book isn’t about *how* to quit...or even about what constitutes a “good” or “bad” quit. There is no instruction manual for quitting.

Quitting is a means to learn about ourselves, to learn about our tradeoffs and our values. And as the stories in this book show, quitting can be a great way to actually *live* your values. Even though me quitting improv revealed things about myself I didn’t particularly like, it was learning that the hard way that allowed me to become more of a risk-taker, more of a “let’s try it, why the hell not?” kind of person instead of a perfectionist intent on just doing the “right” thing. In so many ways, personal and professional, me quitting improv became the primordial ooze against which I built my life in a very different way than that twenty-year-old Tracey Flick type might have done otherwise. While this book focuses on stories about no-regrets quitting, even the “bad” quits can teach you a lot about yourself.

Society and its pithy sayings have tricked us into believing that quitting something or otherwise making a big decision or move is a risk. But who is to say that “sticking it out” in that

job or that relationship or that identity isn't riskier than quitting? We all know the phrase “Damned if you do, damned if you don't.” Why can't we look at quitting similarly and think “It's a risk if you do, it's a risk if you don't?” Why is stasis and living life with inertia seen as less risky than decisive change and forward momentum?

Quitting is a choice. But so is *not* quitting.

Despite being a born achiever and completion-ist, I think I always had a bit of the quitter in me. I remember visiting home during college and my dad, a lifelong doctor who had to choose his career when he was in eighth grade, called me into his den for a “talk.” He basically advised me to “find a good job with a good company and stay there forever.” I remember laughing out loud and without even thinking, replying, “That's not how the world works anymore, Dad.” Despite not having had a career yet - and having ZERO knowledge about global and domestic economic policies playing out at the time - I knew that the career loyalty and commitment of my parents' generation was a thing of the past. My generation saw parents stay in horrible marriages “for the kids” when the kids might have been better off with happily divorced parents. My generation few up with stories of our elders dropping dead the day after they retired from a lifelong job they hated. In that moment in my dad's den, I think I knew: my life was going to have to include a lot of pivoting, reinvention, and starting over — in essence, a lot of quitting.

I've kept a mental tally of my “Quitting Inventory” over the years. Ever since the bad quit of quitting improv, I have “good” quit:

<bullets1>three careers

<bullets1>two full-time jobs

<bullets1>two friendships (one of which I un-quit)

<bullets1>two romantic relationships

<bullets1>one marriage

<bullets1>six cities

I encourage you to do your own “Quitting Inventory.” Even if you haven’t quit anything, that you are not a quitter, you may be surprised by what a quick re-examination of your life choices yields.

Your Quitting Inventory is a surface level start. Asking “why” you quit those things will get to the heart of who you are, what you value, and what you want out of life.

For everyone I spoke to for this book about their quitting stories, the final question I asked was for them to complete the following sentence: “I wasn’t willing to put up with _____.”

For me, my quits, good and bad, can be summed up as follows:

I wasn’t willing to put up with...

<bullets1>Sexual harassment and not feeling safe in the workplace.

<bullets1>Learning that I might be bad at something I loved (ahem, improv).

<bullets1>Risking my college GPA.

<bullets1>Being treated with complacency and negligence.

<bullets1>Other people toying with my livelihood.

<bullets1>Letting a man make me feel insecure about myself.

<bullets1>Not working in a meritocracy.

<bullets1>Living in a one-industry town.

<bullets1>Needing to spend more time navigating bureaucracy and office politics than actually doing work.

<bullets1>The expectation that I stay polite and quiet in the face of selfishness and racism.

I share many of these personal reflections in the book. This list of things I wasn't willing to put up with is essentially a list of my life's biggest choices, my biggest swings for the fences. This list is a life of values and tradeoffs that I am incredibly proud of. Every single one of them propelled me on to a better version of myself, nudged me closer to actually finding what I wanted from life, love, and labor. It's a list of active choices, of being an active participant in my life. One thing I know for sure from this list: my life will not be one lived based on inertia.

One of the lovely people who shared their story for this book said about summoning the courage to quit: “When we have very few examples of what the alternative would look like, it often seems safer to just stick with the status quo”

This is why I chose to use stories from everyday people to inspire and motivate us to rethink and destigmatize quitting -- to give numerous examples of the alternative to toeing the line, living your life for other people, being stuck because you are “sticking it out.”

The stories in this book go beyond just their “I Quit ____” titles. You'll encounter themes and discussions around topics that span more than just what the storytellers quit, including:

<bullets1>Quitting due to gained knowledge

<bullets1>Quitting to benefit others

<bullets1>Quitting as an act of privilege

<bullets1>Quitting things you excel at

<bullets1>Quitting as a singular act versus an ongoing choice to be made

<bullets1>Quitting's intersections with family, class, race, and culture

My hope is that this book will be a small contribution to changing the stigma around quitting and quitters, and will start to normalize quitting as a sign of self-awareness, self-worth, courage, and progress. I hope reading this book makes you entirely rethink how you view quitting

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- and quitters. It will encourage you to reexamine your own quitting experiences through a new paradigm. It may even inspire you to make that next big, positive change for yourself.

So instead of letting all those toxic quitting aphorisms seep into your psyche and rule how you live your life, allow me to offer you a much better “pillow worthy” statement:

<quote>“Of all the stratagems, to know when to quit is the best.”

<quote-attribution>Chinese Proverb

And if you decide to quit this book before finishing it, you will have done me the honor of already being inspired by this book. Thank you!