

How to Quit Your Job

Permanent Vacation

Here's how one man quit his job—forever. You can do it too. Really.

Menshealth.com By Joe Kita, Photographs by Nigel Cox, Posted Date: June 21, 2011



FIVE YEARS AGO, with two kids in college, I quit my job.

After working for more than two decades, I turned my back on a six-figure salary, a tidy annual bonus, and the title of vice president at a major publishing company.

When it came time to sign the parting paperwork, I sat across a desk from the firm's human resources director. He was a staunch, practical man, who had actually offered me a raise to stay. But when I told him I wouldn't be swayed, he looked at me as if I were an abstract painting.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

I nodded.

And with that I walked out of his office and away from the building where I had spent more than half my life, away from the company and the job that had come to define me, and away from colleagues who had become family. Unlike when I'd thrown my cap in the air at college graduation, the feeling of freedom this time was bittersweet. Back then my whole life was ahead of me; now it felt like it was behind me. I was starting over at age 46, but I wasn't quite sure what, exactly, would come next.

A crazy idea had prompted all this. At the time, I was giving occasional lectures on a luxury cruise ship—talks based on books I'd written. It was a great gig that led to nice cruises through the Panama Canal, along the Mexican Riviera, and up to Alaska. On these trips I met so many successful, fascinating people that I eventually had the idea of teaching memoir writing at sea. After all, leaving a legacy of money is nothing special for rich people. But leaving a legacy of *self*—of life's lessons and experiences—is priceless. So I pitched the idea to the folks at the cruise line. They bit: I was invited on the line's annual 3 1/2-month around-the-world cruise.

And just like that, I was at a crossroad.

Would I continue in my safe, secure career, diligently contributing to my 401(k) and living for the weekend, or would I throw it all away and sail around the world? From where you're sitting, that may seem like no choice at all—you pursue the dream, of course. But when the choice is real and not fantasy, when your employer doesn't offer sabbaticals, when your family is relying on you, and when it means walking away from everything you've built—it isn't such an easy choice.

I agonized for weeks.

What finally persuaded me was the memory of my father, who had worked for 45 years and then died 16 months into retirement. He never had the chance to travel and live his dream. No one knows what tomorrow brings.

Since leaving my job, I've sailed around the world three times. As I write this, my ship is in the Indian Ocean, heading toward South Africa. In addition to memoir writing, I now teach yoga with my wife. Our son and daughter, now college graduates, even join us sometimes. When we're not at sea, I'm a freelance writer and my wife works as a registered nurse. What do these two jobs have in common? They're portable. You can pick them up or drop them at your convenience, not the boss's. They rely on connections we've made over the course of our careers. And they happen to be in sync with an increasingly outsourced economy.

Now, you might not want to enter into this kind of arrangement if you carry your life savings in your wallet, or if quintuplets are running around your living room. But for a great many of us, being tied down is something we submit to. It's not a necessity for how we live our lives. And

that realization set me free.

I tell you this story not to boast but to let you know that escape is possible. *The Endless Summer* can be your life script. No matter how mired you are in the everyday, no matter how skinned your nose may be from the grindstone, you still have the ability to look up and walk away. Make no mistake: The first step will scare you, and there will be many times when you'll consider turning back. But if you're resourceful and willing to hustle, and—most important—if you listen to your own voice instead of everyone else's, you can thrive.

I'm often asked how I survived the first step and then lived to take many more. Here's the best set of directions I can provide.

AVOID LIFE'S GREAT ANCHOR

Debt, that is. If you can keep from becoming tangled in its chain, you'll always have the freedom to set sail. I paid extra principal on my 30-year mortgage and was done with it in 15 years. I started putting \$100 a month into custodial accounts for each of my kids the day they were born so they'd have money for college. I bought used cars instead of new ones. I never carried a credit-card balance. And early on I learned the difference between a want and a need. Never forget the second half of the phrase "debt-free."

CAPTAIN YOUR OWN SHIP

I've met thousands of successful men on these cruises, and most of them have one thing in common: They're entrepreneurs. For example, there was the guy who invented the absorbent material in diapers, and the chap who had the sock franchise for the entire NFL, and the doctor who built the first pacemaker. They took responsibility for their own successes. Not only did the hard work make them financially rich, but striving for success made them rich of heart as well.

SWAB THE DECK DAILY

Most people think I'm a lucky son of a bitch—that for some reason life has smiled on me while it continues to frown on them. But I spent 30 years working in life's galley, logging 50-hour weeks, commuting on the interstate, raising a family, and keeping up the house on weekends. That kind of diligence not only lays a foundation of confidence and resourcefulness but also makes the other side seem sweeter when you finally break through to it. Whether you're the captain of your ship or just one of the crew, your future isn't about luck; it's about today's sweat.

HAVE A GOOD FIRST MATE

While we're at sea, my wife and I live in an 8-by-20-foot stateroom; we're probably closer now than we've ever been in our entire 27-year marriage. (And it isn't just because of the living arrangement.) Should my son ever ask my advice on women, I'll tell him this: "Find a good traveler." Meaning that if she can keep smiling when the bus breaks down, if she can deftly readjust when the itinerary unexpectedly changes, and if she sees adventure rather than stress in the unfamiliar, then you've found a good woman—even if the two of you never leave home.

DON'T CHASE A FORTUNE IN TREASURE

I'd be remiss if I didn't say something about money and how much you need in the bank before making your break. I have a friend back home who works harder than any man I know. He has his own business and lives for the day when he and his wife can travel as we do. But before he stops working, he wants to be absolutely certain he has enough money. The problem is, over the last decade, what's "enough" has continually been pushed out. Maybe he is wise and I am foolish, but I've come to believe that whatever you have in the bank is already adequate. In fact, from my world travels, I've seen firsthand that we need far less than we think we do. Economists who have studied relative rates of happiness around the globe have found only a weak relationship between wealth and life satisfaction. Sometimes poorer people feel richer in the things that actually matter.

DO THE COLUMBUS

The more time I spend at sea, the more I'm amazed by those sailors of yore who set out in flimsy wooden ships, unsure of even the shape of the world. Men nowadays need cojones like that. By all means, study the map, plot a logical course, and take on adequate provisions, but don't be afraid to push off from shore. I had a crazy idea that I thought just might work, and I pursued it. You probably have lots of ideas. Go ahead and pursue one. That single, simple step is what separates the men that history remembers from the ones it doesn't.

FIND YOUR SEA LEGS

I've been in cyclones in the South Pacific, crossed the angry Tasman Sea, and sailed around the tip of South America with the wind screaming. When you're safe on land, you never think twice about balance. But when you're on a moving ship, you quickly realize that nothing can happen without it. So ground yourself in life, pick a focal point, and then relax and breathe. Practice this every day, in every situation. It'll help you cope. It'll keep you centered. And when it's finally your time to jump, it'll help you land safely.

STEER THE RIGHT COURSE

A man has undeniable obligations—to his spouse, to his kids, to society. But he also has a responsibility to himself. Most guys think fulfilling family duties is selfless and that looking out for number one is selfish. Not necessarily. If you're hardly ever home (physically and mentally) because you're working all the time, are you really doing your duty? When you put responsibility for yourself first, all those other obligations eventually find a way of taking care of themselves. When you're following your heart and doing what you want to do, you just may become a better father, husband, friend, colleague, and citizen.

SCAN THE HORIZON

Among my friends and acquaintances, I'm the go-to guy for job-quitting inquiries. So whenever anyone asks me if they should move on from their current gig, I ask a question in return: "Are you still learning?" If your own answer is yes, then you should stay because you are still growing. But if it's no, then it may be time to move on, because it is in learning that we find opportunity, burnish different skills, and stumble upon new ideas.

It is our destiny to reach toward our capacity. Gandhi said, "Live like you will die tomorrow,

but learn like you will live forever." The thing I love about my life now is that I am learning and growing every day. Can you say that about your days, and about your life's work? If not, what are you waiting for?