

I was a workaholic, but quitting has transformed my life for the better

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Perspective by Janet Hook

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My name is Janet. I'm a recovering workaholic.

Almost two years ago I quit working full time and transformed my life. After decades as a frazzled, 24-7 Washington political reporter I retired and became a freelance writer, leaving more time to cultivate other interests and try new things. It's been great for my physical and mental health.

I loved my career, but it consumed me. Phone calls came and went at all hours. Pinging texts and news alerts relentlessly jangled my nerves. All my waking hours, I checked Twitter as reflexively as I used to check my watch (remember wristwatches?). During frequent road trips, I ate too much bad food and exercised too little.

Then, in fall 2021, for a variety of personal and professional reasons, I decided it was time for something different. I didn't call it retirement, because I planned to keep writing — just not on deadline, not all the time and not exclusively about politics.

But I had turned 67, so people inevitably concluded I was retiring. My preferred description of my new chapter: "I quit my job, and I'm not looking for another one." I was grateful to have the financial security to do so.

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There's been no identity crisis after dropping my affiliation with a major newspaper. No painful withdrawal from the adrenaline rush of deadline writing. No FOMO — fear of missing out — when I am not on the front lines of major political news, such as the indictments of former president [Donald Trump](#) or Russia's invasion of Ukraine or the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

My friends and colleagues, many of whom are at a similar career juncture, are amazed that I could actually pull this off. [Some research](#) on working and retirement suggests that quitting work entirely can be bad for your well-being, if it undercuts your sense of purpose and motivation to stay active and connected to a community.

“The people who have the hardest time are the people who have been over-involved in work and not invested in any other kinds of activities, and don’t have a community to get involved in when the work community is no longer there,” said Jacquelyn B. James, founder of the Sloan Research Network on Aging & Work at Boston College. But if done right, other research shows, quitting or scaling back work improves well-being by allowing more time for health-enhancing activities such as exercise, sleep and passion projects.

“Getting more sleep, eating better, making more connections, going back to hobbies you have not done in a while — most people find that incredibly rewarding and enriching,” said Kenneth S. Shultz, professor of psychology at California State University at San Bernardino.

For me, the health rewards were immediate and unmistakable.

I’ve never been in better shape, physically. I’m at a 6:15 a.m. boot camp four times a week. I lost weight and have kept (most of it) off. My chronic headaches have gone away.

And psychologically, fellow workaholics may be able to learn from my experience. Quitting my full-time job gave me the exhilarating freedom to rethink bigger questions: What are the components of a good life? Of a fulfilling day? How do I make a meaningful contribution to a struggling world that plainly needs everyone to pitch in?

I’m not going to lie: It was not easy to quit being a reporter when I did, in October 2021, during the run-up to a fascinating midterm election. One strategy that helped with the transition: I immediately left D.C. Rather than stay in the home where, for decades, I’d leaped out of bed and gone to work, I made a fast getaway to spend the fall at our house on Great Cranberry Island, Maine — a place I associate with a simpler, healthier life.

I can almost feel my blood pressure drop the moment I step off the ferry. I spend more time outdoors, hiking and kayaking. All meals are home-cooked. Another important decision I made was to set aside the first three months after I quit as a sabbatical — a completely work-free zone. I held off on seeking freelance assignments. Any time I had a work-related idea — “Have a brainstorming lunch with X” — instead of doing it, I’d put it on a list of things to do after Jan. 1, the three-month mark.

I got good advice from a friend who had quit daily journalism before me: Make a list of four to five things I wanted to do after quitting. Mine read a little like my New Year’s resolutions, but they suddenly seemed more achievable: Travel and hike more. Explore different writing genres. Learn Spanish. Do more volunteer work. Exercise daily.

My overriding commitment: As often as possible, try new things.

I’m convinced I have learned more from this chapter of trying new things — writing book reviews, nature essays and travel articles; advising young writers; learning how to rescue myself from an overturned kayak; studying Zen Buddhism — than I would have if I’d stayed on the front lines of covering a couple more elections, as interesting and important as they might be.

Those 2022 midterm elections came and went. Another presidential election is looming, and I am not sorry I’m not going to be covering full time what could possibly be another Biden-Trump race.

So workaholics of the world take heed: Quitting a full-time job is not necessarily the end of a career. For me, it was the beginning of another growth spurt.

Janet Hook is a former political reporter for the Los Angeles Times and Wall Street Journal.