The gods of Greek mythology could be brutal when angered. Of all the punishments given by the gods, the one given to Sisyphus stands out above the rest. Sisyphus was a king and a trickster. He was so clever that he actually cheated death – twice! As punishment for his hubris, he was forced to push an enormous boulder up a mountain for eternity. Again and again, he would struggle under the weight of the rock only to watch it roll back down. The punishment was a recipe for meaningless frustration. According to behavioral economist Dan Ariely’s research, the Greek gods must have known something about the human psyche. Ariely says that money is not as motivating as we might think. He makes the point that people run marathons and climb mountains all the time and they do it all for free. These are grueling experiences. Somehow a series of miserable moments becomes a desirable overall experience. As Ariely explored this mystery, he found that meaningful work, challenging work and work that is acknowledged motivates us more than money. In one experiment, Ariely paid people to build very simple toys using legos. The amount they were paid decreased with each toy they built. As you might expect, the participants eventually stopped building them when the money became too small. Next, Ariely started disassembling the toys right in front of the participants while they were building their next toy. He did this to show them that their job had no meaning. After seeing the futility of their work, they were much quicker to quit despite the money they were receiving. This was true even for the participants that enjoyed working with legos. Ariely says this shows that meaningful work is more motivating than money and enjoyment. Ariely also discovered that challenging work was motivating. In another experiment, participants who were not given instructions on how to complete a task valued their work much more than those that were given instructions. Acknowledgement in the workplace is important for motivation. In yet another experiment, Ariely gave participants some paperwork. Once they completed the work, they handed it in. It was either ignored and put into a pile, acknowledged with a superficial ‘uh-huh’ or put directly into a shredder. The results were similar to the toy building experiment, but they found something else interesting: ignoring the person’s work was nearly as demotivating as shredding it! Humans are complicated creatures. What motivates one person may not motivate another. But if Ariely is correct, work that is meaningful and challenging, with even a minor amount of acknowledgement can go a long way toward a more satisfying and productive work life.

Bill Gates has been named the world’s richest man 16 times. While he owes much of his success to perseverance, he probably owes just as much to his willingness to quit. It turns out that the old saying, “quitters never win and winners never quit” isn’t exactly true. Many of the world’s most successful people are serial quitters. Gates probably wouldn’t be the famous billionaire he is today if he hadn’t dropped out of college. He was a sophomore at the prestigious Harvard College when he decided to quit. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg also famously quit Harvard College to pursue his dream. Mahatma Gandhi quit his successful career as a lawyer and went on to become one of the most famous revolutionaries in history. According to psychologists Gregory Miller and Carsten Wrosch, people who are willing to quit are healthier than those who refuse to give up. In one study the psychologists looked at two different groups of people. They called the group that was willing to give up the “Quitters” and the group that refused to give up, the “Bulldogs.” In almost every measure of health, the Quitters performed better. They suffered less from skin disorders, poor sleep, indigestion, and headaches. They also found that the Bulldog’s stress hormones showed they were in a state of chronic stress. Quitting doesn’t just support our health. The freedom to quit has also been statistically linked to healthier marriages. In the U.S. before the 1960s a marriage could only end in divorce if both partners agreed to it. In the late 60s and 70s this law changed so that anyone could divorce without permission from their partner. Stanford University researchers found that this new ability to freely end a marriage led to women’s suicide rates dropping by 20 percent and domestic violence rates falling as well. Some companies even recognize that employees quitting can also be beneficial to the company. One progressive online company, Zappos even pays its new employees $1,000 to quit within the first month. Zappos believes that their company culture will benefit from employing people who are there for more than just money. Because customer service is such a big part of Zappos’ success, they need employees who are willing to go the extra mile for them. That means hiring people that have enthusiasm for the job, not just for the money. It seems the freedom to quit is not only a basic human right, but an essential part of being a healthy human being. It’s just not true that “quitters never win and winners never quit.” Sometimes quitting is an important part of winning in the end.