

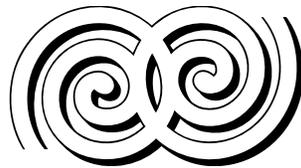
**In Search of Harmony:
Becoming Your Own Hero at Work**

by

Vivian Ellis Zabriskie

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Forward

In the interesting journey called life one of the most frequent and frustrating challenges is found in working out the subtle relationship between the individual and the organization. The love-hate dilemma faced by so many people derives from the potential power for an enormous constructive contribution from our organizational involvement juxtaposed to an often equally potent potential power for destruction. Whether this organizational encounter is positive or negative depends to a large degree on how the individual defines and manages the interface.

In Vivian Zabriskie's thoughtful account of her own organizational odyssey we can learn much about the problems and the opportunities we all face in the variety of organizations encountered every day in addition to the overpowering presence of our work organization. In this book we see a very honest and painful learning process as each challenge is turned into an important learning experience. While her specific solutions may not fit everyone's situation, her personal achievement and general framework can be both useful and inspirational for all of us.

In addition to the attitude and mind-set needed to cope with organizations, Zabriskie offers a set of very pragmatic skills that can be helpful in this empowering/hero quest. Would that we all might develop the commitment to manage our own organizational roles as well as helping others to find a better way that Vivian Zabriskie has described in this sensitive work.

J. Bonner Ritchie

Professor of Organizational Behavior, Ret.

Brigham Young University

Dean, College of Business

Utah Valley State College

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many people who have helped me on my journey, especially Professor J. Bonner Ritchie of Brigham Young University to whom much of the credit is due for this work. For many years he has been the standard bearer for the idea that organizations are inherently unsafe, warning us to be aware of the ever-present potential for abuse. His personal character, ideas, and masterful teaching shaped my views immeasurably. Most important, Bonner gave me my first successes at pursuing the questions of my heart—an experience without which this book would perhaps never have been written. In addition, Bonner introduced me to organizational theorist Karl Weick’s work in causal relationships, challenging me to accept his theory that much of what troubles organizations and the people who work in them is of their own making. Painfully, I learned how right he was about *enacting* my *own* environment; only in looking back may we determine the efficacy of our choices.

A special thanks for the work of Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers for giving me a paradigm to view my own healing journey leading to the creation of my heroes’ journey model. Kerry Patterson’s scribbles on a napkin in the bookstore cafe clarified my thinking about some of the stages in the hero’s journey. Also the works of psychiatrists Viktor Frankl, Thomas Szasz, and Scott Peck validated and strengthened my ideas about the sacredness of liberty, responsibility, and the power of personal choice.

Georgetown University professor Jerry Harvey’s insights into the craziness of organizational life confirmed what I witnessed in my own life within the context of *collusion*, a forerunner to his sobering question, “How come every time I get stabbed in the back, my fingerprints are on the knife?” He and Brigham Young University professor Terry Warner gave me penetrating perspectives on the ethical, moral, and spiritual dilemmas we all face at work. Warner’s seminal work in self-betrayal was a welcome compliment to my research in workplace abuse and personal victimization. Anne Wilson Schaef and several other authors of co-dependency literature helped me stay the course in changing my own patterns. Psychologists James Hillman’s and John Bradshaw’s fertile imaginations inspired me to see the extraordinary buried in the everyday events of life. Meg Wheatley’s work solidified my belief that from harmony unity is born when we move toward the middle in polarized, chaotic situations. Rachel Remen’s stories intensified my desire to strengthen the mind, body, and spirit connection. Physicist David Bohm’s work on changing consciousness as a function of achieving meaningful dialogue helped me “listen to my listening.”

I am also indebted to playwright, former dissident and Czech president Václav Havel. His writings about totalitarianism, truth, and the responsibility to dissent give a profound understanding to the phrase “power of the powerless” and the incredible satisfaction of having the courage to “disturb

the peace,” even if for only a few almost imperceptible acts at a time. His mission to bear witness to the terrors and miseries he saw, in other words, “to *warn* rather than to hand out prescriptions for change,”¹ inspired me to continue my journey to do the same.

Most important, my spiritual leaders kept the focus where it rightfully belongs and from which my most profound learning has taken place.

Also, thanks to Jolene Adair, Linda Hunter Adams, Jimmy Chua, Alan and LeRay Checketts, Susan Eliason, Randy Gibbs, Stacy Keith, Dominique Lambson, Alan Larsen, Kim Lunt, Sheila Mitchell, Rob Page, Bert Peterson, Kreig Smith, Jen and David Storey, Pat Woodbury, and the people who have shared their work experiences with me. I am deeply grateful to my two sons, Ashley and Kevin Couch, whose tremendous sacrifice allowed me to follow my dream to complete my education. Most of all, I thank my husband, Bill, for his never-failing love and belief in my creative ability to do good things.

In memory of my parents, two extraordinary heroes in spite of everything

Famous

The river is famous to the fish.
The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.

Naomi Shihab Nye

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My Personal Odyssey

Our worklife is difficult. It is becoming more painful. Once we truly understand and accept the toxic nature of our worklife, we can transcend it. Even our most difficult experiences at work become gifts—if we learn the lessons we need to learn. As the darkness prepares us for dawn, and winter for spring, from disharmony, unity is born.

What better evidence of this principle than to witness the solidarity born in the rubble of September 11. Countless courageous acts of heroism have lifted us to renewed faith in each other and in our nation. The challenge of dealing with adversity in our worklife pales in comparison to the horror that changed all of our lives forever. Since September 11, by comparison almost every difficulty in our lives seems less important. Yet, the repercussions of living with terror as a way of life only make pre-existing adversities more perplexing.

My decision to speak out about adversity in the workplace comes from my personal struggles at work and in life. After working for more than two decades as a mental health director, management trainer, and organizational consultant, I felt compelled to do something about the extraordinary pressure upon good people to do bad things at work. Since the workplace is where 135 million people spend most of their waking hours, it should not come as a surprise that “standing for something” at work is not easy. Carved within our hearts are indelible memories of dominion gone amok. Collective power failures in all kinds of institutions tell us how easy it is to lose our moral compass. For many of the 80 percent of American families where both parents work, the stress is at the breaking point.

Prior to the terrorists attacks upon our nation and revelations about corporate malfeasance, my research showed that at least 50 percent of the American work force was either working wounded, cynical, or indifferent. This also includes many professionals whose job it is to do something about it. Now, everyone who goes to work each day faces the new challenges of living with an unrelenting fear about what might happen next. Horrifying images forever seared into our memory will always remind of us of that fateful, clear September morning when all hell broke loose. Corporate executives literally make out like bandits while their employees’ and stock holders’ life savings

dwindle to nothing. With no history to guide us and no role models to show us the way, we need each other in ways never known before.

Yet, because of the strong corporate ethic not to discuss organizational pain, there is virtually no forum for having meaningful dialogue about it. Most often, we are left to our own devices in learning how to deal with adversity at work, never really getting to the core of what is wrong or what to do about it. Moral and ethical dilemmas create double-binds and crises of conscience that hold workers hostage to a life out of control. The cycle of organizational pain becomes self-perpetuating and self-defeating, exhausting the vitality and self-worth of its members. Who will risk telling the Emperor he's wearing no clothes?

I have taken this risk because I believe the truth will make us a little more free from the bondage of our worklife. My message is one of hope and reconciliation, not blame and retribution. The general focus of this book creates a new awareness of the illusions and misconceptions about our worklife, balanced with increased spiritual discernment as the basis for making decisions and solving problems.

The thesis of my book challenges conventional views of organizational development by saying: In the workplace of the 21st century, you *can't* make organizations safe. You *can* help people become *safer* within their workplaces and provide them with better ways to *protect* themselves and others from the organizational pain that is always a potential threat. In spite of what the self-help success gurus would have us believe, our worklife is *managed* and *reconciled* not cured. I reject the traditional view of success in the workplace based upon how high we rise or how much money we make. For many people this kind of success never comes, or they reject this criterion for success altogether. Not everyone gets promoted, their stocks don't rise, and 7, 10, or 100 easy steps will not fix their problems. Everyone's journey is unique and individual. Hence, there are few recipes for success in the traditional meaning of the word.

Intuitively, we know that the old paradigms of simple solutions, competition, and self-interest do not work—even though we are caught up in the jungle morality of survival of the fittest. Only through a return to careful, consistent, and unapologetic moral judgment may we come to recognize our own involvement as naive accomplices in our difficulties. Only then may we experience the change of heart necessary to make lasting course corrections in our worklife. As we become the change we want to see, the workplace then becomes a resource, not a limiting force. This is the hero's journey—to find harmony by making principled choices regardless of circumstances and by learning the lessons we need to learn.



You can't make organizations safe. Your worklife is managed and reconciled, not cured.

The symptoms of “cultured” violence are increasingly self-evident. Today, we want our leaders to be hands-on, “value-driven,” hungry for success, impatient with failure, and aggressively competitive. In other words, we reward people for being ruthless. Caught in a web of expediency and opportunism, surviving the day at work is often a triumph. In addition to the stress of uncertainty, our integrity is frequently put on the line as we struggle to come up with right responses to wrong behaviors, often at the peril of losing our jobs, our health, or most important, our souls in the process.

While we hope, pray, and work for a return to the fundamental principles of virtuous living, we cannot wait for someone to rescue us from our woes as we hang by our proverbial fingernails. We need more insight and understanding about the realities of the workplace and more courage to become our own heroes, because the noble person on the white horse will *not* come to rescue us from our pain.

In 1976, a scene from the movie *Network* piqued my interest in the toxic nature of our worklife, setting into play profound consequences on my life's journey. The movie was about the dehumanizing world of work at a television station and one anchorman's struggle to survive the daily assaults on his and the audience's moral character. One day while on the air, the anchor man snapped, unable to continue with the great farce of his life. Ad-libbing the *real* news about the deception portrayed to the television audience, he aroused thousands of couch potatoes out of their stupor, inviting them to go over to their windows to declare, “I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it any more!” It was an impressive scene, first one person responding, then another and another, the camera slowly pulling back to show an entire apartment building and then a whole city of people bellowing their declarations of independence out their windows.

Something woke up in me as I watched this scene. Seeing this small but significant act of individual and collective heroism stirred within me a feeling of vicarious power to break out of my own

imprisonment—not just about work, but with life in general. I was well acquainted with villainy and betrayal, waiting for some hero to rescue me from my woes. In my mind I was a bonafide victim: a survivor of childhood abuse, the loss of my father at the age of eight, a very difficult marriage and divorce, then struggling as a single parent with no education in a dead-end job. Yet, the white knight never came. Longing for the good life, I read the want ads and dreamed on—of college, opportunity, recognition, financial success, and, most of all, a lighter load to carry.

Shortly after seeing this movie, I went to my own window and declared, “I’m not going to take this any more!” I made a prayerful commitment to do the work if God would open the doors. I stepped onto the path leading me away from victimism.

The doors opened. Receiving a minority scholarship as a white student to attend a predominately black university, I graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in psychology from Winston-Salem State University. I am the first member of my family to earn a college degree. Upon graduation, I packed all I owned in a Ryder truck and moved from North Carolina to Provo, Utah, to attend Brigham Young University, graduating with a Master’s degree in Organizational Behavior. At last, against overwhelming odds, I achieved my dream of what I perceived to be success: landing a prestigious, high-paying job through which I could express my creativity and also help improve the quality of people’s lives at work.

But the story didn’t turn out the way I thought it would—at least when evaluated by the standard measures of success. I was totally unprepared for the brutality of corporate life. As an organizational consultant and management training professional, I believed what I knew about organizations and life itself gave me the power to change things for the better. Yet, in spite of my best efforts, things didn’t improve very much, or for those that did, the change was short lived. In fact, sometimes situations actually worsened—even with the help of a team of three Master’s level internal organizational consultants and one Ph.D. external consultant!

Notwithstanding a good education and a fertile field of life experiences to draw upon for wisdom and strength, I felt profoundly powerless to understand why this was so or to do anything about it. For years, I struggled to reconcile the lack of harmony between what I thought I knew and my own personal experience. Watching people get chewed up like ground beef, and my inability to do anything about it, confirmed my life script I had fought so hard to change: I thought, “There really *is* something wrong with me.” Burned out and bewildered from the adversity and organizational pain that I experienced personally and saw others suffer, I retreated to my garden to allow my wounds to heal, to reflect upon what went wrong, and to integrate important lessons learned.

At first, I did not choose to opt out of my career; I just could not go back. Though every rational thought pulled me to accept one of several opportunities to make more money than I ever dreamed possible, the more tender, creative, natural part of me said, “You have more important work to do.” In 1986, a comment made by a colleague lodged in my heart and wouldn’t let go. He said, “What we ought to do is teach people how to become their own heroes.” I felt it was an issue for which I was uniquely qualified and spiritually called to address. Though I surely did not know how to become a hero at work, I believed I had the life experiences, grit, and spiritual guidance to shed some light on the topic for myself and others. I sat in front of the blank screen of my computer and pondered deeply.



Work was something I became accustomed to early in life. From about ten years of age, I worked. My first job was as a laborer in the tobacco fields of North Carolina. Though I earned only \$3.00 for working from dawn until dusk, I loved the independence it gave me, the feelings of self-worth, the freedom to buy the clothes I wanted. I loved looking forward to lunch time, sitting under a shady oak tree relishing a fried baloney sandwich, an RC Cola, and a Moon Pie. I savored the conversations of the adults and the challenge of keeping pace with the “stringer,” handing the tobacco to her two leaves at a time. Even the big green tobacco worms provided excitement in an otherwise repetitious and monotonous task.

As I grew up, each new job brought more value to my self-concept, until, finally, when I finished my education at the age of 42, I thought, “Great, now life won’t be so hard.” At last, I could reap the harvest, not have to struggle so much and have a little control in my life. After all the sacrifices—the 60-hour-plus work weeks to get through graduate school, driving the same old Ford Maverick for 13 years, and the hardest sacrifice of all, providing insufficient support to my children—I was jobless and broken. Nobody could have that much bad luck. It had to be me, something rotten to the core of my being that nobody wanted to have around.

After getting buried in an avalanche of layoffs three different times, getting fired from one job, and quitting another, my whole world caved in. Ironically, my responsibility was to teach and advise others about improving organizational effectiveness. Naively, I thought this protected me from being caught in the downsizing trends picking up steam in the ’80s. Every day I woke up so despondent that I struggled just to get out of bed. I felt utterly betrayed and rejected. Nearly every

waking moment, I was preoccupied with blame and self-loathing. My feelings of abandonment, my sense of powerlessness, consumed me.

Having recently re-married, for the first time in my life I did not have to work. My husband's salary was sufficient for our family. Yet, living my fantasy of just staying home—not having to deal with all the pressures of working—just made me miserable. For all of my life, my identity was based on what I was able to *do*, not what I was able to *be*. Since I *was* my job, and now I no longer had one, I had nothing to fill a void so profound I didn't know where to start nor what to do.

Thank God I listened to the barely audible finer part of myself, beckoning me away from the distraction of desire for fame, power, recognition, and money. I embarked on a new journey to redefine who I was independent of my professional work. Stripped naked of any semblance of self-worth, I started peeling away the layers of my false identity, the false hero image I had manufactured for myself. I peeled the onion down to the tears, to the core of my true nature. Escaping to my secret garden, I weeded and waded through melancholic memories, reconciling losses of a lifetime so profound I could not face until then. Digging in the dirt of my life in my garden, I discovered the delicious and tangible glory of watching things grow. My secret garden gave me back my softness, my gentleness, things for which there was little approval in the masculine world of business. Trained to deny my wholeness, it was there in my garden I learned I am no more my job than a garden is weeds. And neither are you.



Often people attempt to live their lives backwards: they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want so that they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you need to do, in order to have what you want.

—Margaret Young

In our life's chain of events, nothing is accidental. It's not *what* you do, but *how* you do it. God does not care if I am a gardener or an organizational development consultant. What *is* important is

how I handle the trials. Adversity in the workplace can make us or break us. It's really up to us. In Mother Teresa's words, "God does not demand that I be successful. God demands that I be faithful."

The problems addressed herein for the most part stem from my experiences in a variety of organizations. My career has afforded me many opportunities to observe the consequences of man's inhumanity to man. As director of a mental health agency for eight years, I saw the consequences of all kinds of abuse. As a white student in a predominately black university, I learned how it feels to be judged because of the color of my skin. As director of a crisis center, I learned more about the horror of family violence and sexual assault. (I was also reminded that people in the helping professions are no different than the rest of us who fall short in practicing what we preach.) As director of a women's organization, I learned about the insidious mistreatment of women to *each other*. As an organizational development consultant, I learned that most people are not necessarily bad—we have just not yet learned how to get along very well, especially when we work in groups.

This is particularly true when people's livelihood is threatened (either imagined or real) for whatever reason. People just hate having others mess with their "bread" and will go to almost any length to protect it. I also learned there are some things worth suffering for: living within the truth and preserving the purposes of life. The stories recounted here are all true; the names and circumstances have been disguised to protect the innocent and the guilty.

Most of my insights, however, about how to handle organizational pain have come as a result of my struggles with difficulties *outside* the work environment. Through the ordinary events of life we learn to see the extraordinary. As Brigham Young University professor Arthur Henry King has said,

One of the mistakes we make over and over again in life is to go directly for the things we think are important. But if we aim at self-fulfillment, we shall never be fulfilled. If we aim at education, we shall never become educated. If we aim at salvation, we shall never be saved. These things are indirect, supreme results of doing something else; and the something else is service, it is righteousness, it is trying to do the right thing, the right thing that needs to be done at each moment.²

As much as it was against what I perceived to be my true nature, I "gave up" (kicking and screaming all the way) the need to have everything planned and figured out. I dedicated myself instead to "responding well" to whatever God had in mind for me and my family. There have been many surprises.

While I've worked on this book, it has been an honor and privilege to nurse my mother, mother- and father-in-law, and daughter-in-law through their deaths; to mother my granddaughters; to help my husband fight cancer; and to serve in many capacities in my church and community. All of these things helped to heal my own emotional wounds. I am certain that without these experiences, many of which stretched me almost to a breaking point, I would have been unable to learn the truth about my complicity in much of my difficulties at work. Equally important to my healing journey is a good marriage that provides a safe haven in which to grow.

The goal of this book is to help readers develop the ability to analyze and define situations better, to project the consequences of their actions as best they can, and to help them accept appropriate responsibility for what they do (and don't do) on the job. I want to warn people about potential dangers, especially the seductive pull to surrender their human identity and life's purpose because of their experiences at work. My goal is to help readers generate more alternatives to consider in finding remedies to life's conflicts at work. Because we spend so much of our lives there, work can pressure us toward becoming someone we like or someone we cannot respect. In its most basic and fundamental sense, being a hero begins with being true to yourself—your best self.



Your Hero Quotient equals Experience, Spirit, Principles:

- *Experience*—looking realistically at the current nature of organizations, the realities of working in the 21st century, and developing the critical skills needed to assess and respond to adversity. If we are to *thrive* not just *survive* at work, we must have *mutual* concern for each other. Heroes share abundantly even in a world of scarcity.
- *Spirit*—seeking a spiritual rebirth, a moral awakening to the best within. Only through spiritual discernment may we come to recognize our own participation as naive accomplices in our adversity.
- *Principles*—living by basic essential truths or standards that govern our worklife in the same way we strive to see good, do good, and be good elsewhere in our lives. To do what love requires at work, heroes make daily commitments to understanding four essential R's: What is *real*? What is *relevant*? What is *respectful*? What is *repentant* ?

My paradigm of viewing the workplace in the context of adversity or abuse is only *one* way to view organizational phenomena. Let me hasten to add, in dealing with this topic there are many paradoxes and dilemmas I do not understand; the subject is so broad and so little understood. Even the definition of what constitutes abuse at work is difficult to pin down and generates more controversy than consensus. When I first began working on the book in 1987 almost everyone in my profession said I could not use the word “abuse”—it was too negative. But then there are many negative things that need the light of truth. By naming some of our pain, it often diminishes. As Rousseau said, “The first step in escaping our misery is to recognize it. Let us be humble in order to be wise; let us admit our weakness and we will be strong.”³

I define workplace adversity and organizational pain on a continuum—behaviors, practices, or attitudes that cause employees to experience mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual harm—anything that causes people to feel personally diminished. What constitutes abuse varies widely from person to person. Everyone’s adversity quotient is different. What’s abhorrent behavior for one may be tolerable for another. The bottom line is, we all know when the line of acceptability has been crossed. It is my hope that the ideas herein will move everyone’s line up a little. By examining many of the assumptions which we hold as “truths,” we can explode many of the myths we believe about ourselves individually and collectively. All that is required for self-recovery is to stay on the right path.



*If we are facing in the right direction,
all we have to do is to keep on walking.*

First, we must be standing—not lying down. Like the Tarheel soldiers of North Carolina who stood firmly and fought with resolve as if they had tar on their heels, we must take a stand at work for what is right. We need not get on a moral high horse, but need only to go about quietly finding higher ground on which to stand for ourselves and others. Self-righteousness, personal bewilderment, and feeling “poor in spirit” can easily pull us from our chosen paths of purpose and integrity. My roots run deep in bewilderment from the cotton mill village where the row houses and the outhouses embarrassed me into “getting above my raisin’s” to the mahogany halls of corporate boardrooms. Yet, I love the directness, depth, and street-smart sophistication that comes from the School of Hard Knocks. I admire the saucy, savvy, silent looks—the simplicity and

confidence that come only from having “been there, done that.” My heart is with the “little people” who stand tall, refusing to acquiesce to unrighteous dominion—those who refuse to respond to pain with acts of revenge, piety, indifference, victimism, cynicism, and despair. Here’s to the bewildered standing tall—the everyday heroes . . . “for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.”



Using the Hero’s Journey Model, the chapters in this book are organized to follow a natural progression through the different stages of adjustment and growth. While the model is used here to illustrate specifically different responses to difficulties in the workplace, it also applies to adversity encountered in any organization: the home, church, or community. The workplace is in essence a microcosm or representative analogy of the hero’s life journey—an abstract way of viewing our life purpose. Think of the model as a *general* framework, not a specific descriptor of all situations. *There are no right or wrong stages of the journey.* Most important is how we manage each stage, how adept we are at discerning when we are getting derailed from the path to genuine heroism. As you read, pay attention to the counterfeit attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that appear on the surface to be the journey of the *real* hero, but may in fact be a *false* hero. As you read and contemplate your personal situation, also be aware of the traps of assuming the role of a *false* victim.

To see the world anew, whether you are just starting your career or are a seasoned veteran, consider how you picture your hero’s journey. Is it a linear journey after which, once you have overcome the obstacles in your path, you will arrive feeling satisfied and content? Do you see yourself negotiating a maze, or a labyrinth, at the center of which lie the treasures and truths you crave? Life is seldom so simple. “Destination motivation” is just another form of waiting for the white knight. We are all tempted to think linearly, hoping that when we have overcome certain challenges or fulfilled certain goals, we have made it. However, once we complete one journey, we begin another. Instead of finding the treasures and truths at the *end* of a journey, our reward is in what we have *become* by working through each challenge.

From my own personal odyssey, throughout the book I have included principles I believe are worth remembering. For the lack of a better term, I call them “Vivi Sueisms.” They do not necessarily provide a predictable structure to the book but pop up wherever they seem to fit. Sometimes they introduce a concept; sometimes they amplify an idea; sometimes they conclude or summarize a point. You will also see some 21 myths used in the same way. While there are many more illusions in the workplace that create difficulties for ourselves and others, these are a few that tripped me up

that may also leverage you to a more savvy position. As you read, consider your own principles and myths that either help or derail you from your hero's journey. Recording in a journal these things captured from your "pondering" will create a more powerful learning experience.

Finally, trust your heart as you read. Your heart knows where you are and where you need to go.

Endnotes

1. Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 8. Cited in *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal*, edited by Daniel W. Conway and John E. Seery (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 215.
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