

# CULT

by

William Howell

Also by William Howell  
and available from Sanctuary House Press  
*Collected Poems: 1981 - 2011*

Other Titles from Sanctuary House Press:

\* *FROM THE MOUTH OF THE SUPREME:*  
*The Universal and Complete Gift of Spontaneous Meditation*  
*Specifically for Our Times*

• *WHEN THE SUPREME TAKES A BODY:*  
*The Immortal Journey of Shri Punitacharaji Maharaj*

Sanctuary House Press  
P.O. Box 332, Crestone, Colorado 81131 USA  
[www.sanctuaryhouse.org](http://www.sanctuaryhouse.org)   [Vishnudatta108@yahoo.com](mailto:Vishnudatta108@yahoo.com)  
719.256.4420 / 719.588.4258 (cell)

Copyright 2011 by William Howell

This book is copyrighted solely to prevent its being misused.  
People sincere about spiritual development, peace and growth of  
human awareness throughout the world have the author's  
permission to reproduce material from this book—with citing.

First edition: Printed in the United States of America  
Cover design: William Howell

***Library of Congress-in-Publication Data***  
***Howell, William***

***CULT***

ISBN 0-9761737-0-4 (pbk: alk. paper).

1. Memoir    2. Cult  
3. Spiritual Journey    4. Meditation

To the many who have given themselves  
to what they thought was the highest good.

# Contents

page

Author's Forward

## PART I: The Script

Chapter 1: Gale

Chapter 2: Rope or Snake?

Chapter 3: In Touch with the Down Under

Chapter 4: How Close to the Flame?

## PART II: Into The Unknown

Chapter 5: Taking the Heat

Chapter 6: Heritage

Chapter 7: The Microphone

Chapter 8: The Fabric of Being

Chapter 9: Standing in the Place You Are In

Chapter 10: To Mean or Not to Mean

Chapter 11: Letting Go the Hawk

## PART III: The Sanctity of Final Things

Chapter 12: Dying for Truth

Chapter 13: Love

Chapter 14: Cracks in the Foundation

Chapter 15: Catching Thieves

Chapter 16: The Roof Comes Off

Chapter 17: Weeding

Chapter 18: Pilgrimage

## PART IV: Ungrasping the Light that Casts Shadows

Chapter 19: Desert

Epilogue

## Author's Forward

I never thought I could be involved in a cult, yet ended up in the inner circle. I considered myself a kind and loving person, sincere, understanding, intelligent—non-bizarre in every respect. Perhaps I was. I and those you are about to meet never dreamed that our sincerity could result in deadly entrapment.

You are about to journey into the center of the human quest for meaning. Much has been written about cults, but while sociological studies give mainly information, what fascinates people about cults is part and parcel of what it means to be human. If understanding cults were a required part of our schooling, it seems obvious to me that social ploys of all kinds—from governmental to religious to familial—would not only no longer seem mysterious, but we would also be equipped with the knowledge that could prevent them.

The story before you is a true one, despite the name changes, a few events foreshortened and the large cast of characters cut to a manageable number. The world you're about to enter, so like your own and yet so charged and polarized, may well prove the adage that 'Truth is, indeed, stranger than fiction,' and remove all sense of cliché.

This book is offered as an inoculation, a bearable dose of poison administered so as to prevent an intolerable outbreak of disease. No book can cure the addictive tendencies—to security, to approval and esteem, to power and arrogance, to the longing for knowledge—that constitute the soil into which the seeds of speciality and grandeur are dropped. If you have not been in a cult, you are likely certain that you could never be lured. I certainly hope so. But if you believe you know all you

need to know about cults and consider them irrelevant to your life—you are in for many surprises.

The standard label for those in cults is naïve, unstable, fringe. Yet cults go after the intelligent, the successful, the sincere, anyone anywhere seeking meaning and depth. The bait used is precisely what we seek: love, belonging, advancement, vision, salvation, trust. Whether Eastern or Western, fundamentalist or occult, conservative or progressive, religious or secular, artistic or political, philosophical or psychological—cults form around any avenue of discernment for truth, for depth, for prestige, for power.

The degree of involvement depends on the closeness to the inner circle. All cults are layered events, the higher levels reserved for individuals deemed ‘purer’ and ‘more advanced.’. All cults are destructive, though not usually immediately so. The strange thing is that cults deliver, which is why their adherents are so committed. Yet the way they deliver is filled with great ups and even deeper downs. One thing for sure: cults can never be fulfilling.

There are, thankfully, real teachers among us. Yet more often than not a gifted soul becomes the hub of a group of like-minded individuals and, as a result, a community or organization forms around a charismatic character. While cults are often led by charlatans, most are developed by people of real talent whose urge for power is or becomes corrupted as a result of their hearts having not fully opened.

What is a cult? Enshrined in our collective psyche lies the urge for truth, for reality, for myth-making. Historically, ‘cult’ was not a pejorative, but rather signified a circle of advanced and committed seekers. Yet each circle has a leader, and when attachment and devotion are offered to someone of less-than-divine qualities, such a person, no matter how well-meaning, generally allows his or her actions to be blindsided by

idealism and desire. Maybe such a person falls from grace, yet all too often such a leader simply digs deeper in toward becoming a false teacher, growing in power given by his or her followers.

It is about such a teacher and his band of aspirants that I write. The cult you are about to enter is spiritually based. Since the spiritual realm is subtlest of the realms within us—subtler than politics or art, for example—it is, therefore, the most potentially glorifying and the most potentially devastating. To enter into such a cult is to realize that *Here is the great highway—the widest, straightest and most enticing road to exactly where I have always wanted to go*. While such a voice may well be unspoken, its longing is the elixir that makes it so devastatingly easy to get into such a trap and so damnably hard to get out. The hold of a cult is fixed on the infinitely complex psyche and soul.

If you have been in a cult, you may well be concerned that the cult I was in won't mirror your experience or that it is a specialized event incapable of standing for most cults. Yet all cults are virtually the same. Robert Jay Lifton, MD, in his book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China*, points out the eight commonalities of all systems espousing 'totalism.' His book is not about cults, per se; and yet the thousands of known cults in North America all profess totalism (meaning they claim to be 'all you'll ever need') and operate by pressing the following eight levers:

- 1) **Loading the language:** Cults use specialized words, whose lofty or esoteric connotations expand all meanings into absolutes, thereby taking events out of the ken of normal feeling and discrimination.
- 2) **Milieu control:** Cults put newcomers in close contact with long-timers who often claim to be

novices, quickly sensitizing neophytes into the internally consistent world of the cult, both mentally and environmentally. Expressions of love and community, even sexual lures, establish an emotional involvement powerful enough to override rational inconsistencies. Isolated living can seal the community from a society which most cults term 'sinful' or even 'evil.'

- 3) **'The sacred science'**: Cults employ a closed system of thinking, which, to their members, seems all-inclusive, ultimate, open and makes perfect sense.
- 4) **Mystical manipulation**: 'Planned spontaneity' is a common tool that elicits seemingly spontaneous responses from the group; yet such responses belie a pressurized system of well-governed behavior.
- 5) **Dispensing of existence**: Enforcing cult dynamics largely by insider-versus-outsider thinking means that members feel specially chosen to fulfill the cult's mission. The spiritual health of any member is determined by the cult leader or authorized organization.
- 6) **Doctrine over person**: Employing an absolutist dogma which is always more important than any member, cults thrive and members become expendable once they doubt the dogma.
- 7) **Cult of confession**: Having some sort of personal confessions of sins, often public, whether or not a member has actually committed such offenses, keeps members vulnerable and subservient—easily achieved with anyone whose self-worth is not totally intact. Control is accomplished by dangling

the highest rewards while simultaneously chaining members to unworthiness.

- 8) **Demand for purity:** Demanding various degrees of purity—often in the form of abstinence and austerity—from members, the cult leader can determine who becomes worthy of promised spiritual graces.

Cults, though a majority are not militant, are by no means passive. Their nature is to polarize: member/non-member, cult community/world, obedient/disobedient—to name but a few poles of tension. To get out of a cult and separate from what one believed to be the true path to excellence can mean the loss of assets, reputation, community...even the loss of one's sense of self. The higher the journey, the higher the stakes, and the farther a traveler can fall.

Yet, in dealing with groups that could be considered cultish, if we do not look at each individually and without assumption, we fall into the same black-and-white thinking that cults use to control the mental processes of their members. There is, we must note, a difference between cults and cultish groups—for individuals can make a cult out of an organization that may have only slightly cultish tendencies.

Let us look with compassion behind the menace of cults and recognize their very human cause: individuals wanting more from life, seeking the source of love and truth rather than mere surfaces, looking desperately for greater meaning in daily experience.

The realm of the human psyche is the stage where the heart of the human drama is enacted. Terrifying and far larger than our objective reality, it can also at times

appear more beautiful. Most of us never consciously journey into that arena, fearing the unknown. Those who do are the ones who feel that human dignity and freedom are worth great risk.

Here, then, is the story of five individuals who had the courage, foolish as we were, to enter the 'The Context,' whose 200 members demonstrated the struggle, folly and glory of being in any cult.

I wrote to free myself from the experience that nearly claimed my life. Soon, I realized that this project was not just personal, but also for the others whose spirits were bound with mine. I now offer it to all who have been in a cult, that you may understand, and to those who have not, that you might be spared.

Many are those who helped unchain me, and to them I offer each of these pages. It takes 2-5 years to get free of a cult. May this book contribute to healing what is likely the wound of a lifetime.

PART I:  
THE SCRIPT

*The more impossible the story,  
The greater the truth it holds.*

—Maimonides—

## CHAPTER 1: GALE

The hour was late, most of the stars erased by the fullness of the moon. I was driving through turbulent oak-lined streets on my way to an old-schoolhouse converted into apartments where those closest to Justin Snow lived. The trees were thrashing in great outrage, or great applause.

The night air felt fertile in Victoria, the 'Garden City.' Passing flower-lined walkways curving to grand homes, I felt nothing was linear in this landscape rolled by wind. I found myself stopping by a golf course and walking across fairways to cliffs above the Straits of Juan de Fuca that separated two nations. On the edge of some precipice I could barely define, I had to angle my slight body into the gale.

Recalling my arrival, driving all night only to miss the Port Angeles ferry, I had called the Snow Man Press and spoken to Roland Reeves, Justin's closest friend, to tell him I'd be late. Roland's voice had blown sultry and gay, making me feel already part of...what? I was here to find out. I remembered saying to Roland that I was tired of leading a boring life. I wanted authenticity, to round out my Phi Beta Kappa intellect and ideals with the power of what I was leaning into. I would have gone to jail during the Vietnam War, but had stood up for my beliefs and served as a conscientious objector instead. I had been self-employed, founded a day-care center, and just finished an MFA in Creative Writing, but most importantly had been meditating for 12 years. I wanted to be conscious. Tonight, as I drove on, life seemed suddenly urgent.

Having been 'enlightened' in the Swiss Alps and said to loom larger than any mountain, Justin had named my destination 'Annapurna' after a striking Himalayan peak, conveying to all those near him and especially those living in

Annapurna that the journey of life was an arduous climb to all-sweeping vision. He would be the first to say that such ascent risks more than life itself. Those assaulting the summit and their comrades had better be damned fit. As willing adherents to The Context, their observance of its constant pressures was both their map and their proving ground for their ability scale and conquer the height of what it meant to be human.

I laughed to recall how I had imagined being met at the ferry dock by Justin's friends in a long greeting line, how I would look deeply and lovingly into each pair of eyes, the World Teacher's not included. No, I had not imagined Justin's eyes.

Actually, Roland alone had met me, in the rain just past midnight. Yet I felt important when the man closest to Justin had said, "So this is Bill Howell." His face had been bright and full of energy. His eyes, as if just for me, were intense despite wet glasses. He was well-aware that I had met Justin in Switzerland six years before, that the most mysterious man I had known had sent me three of his books, and that we had exchanged letters. I told Roland that Justin, who never let any of my assumptions go by unnoticed, was onto something, something big.

"I wish I could see all the gardens and the shoreline," I had said as Roland drove me to Annapurna.

"They're all available on the feeling level," had come the cultured, cryptic reply.

Now, as I pulled into a parking space at Annapurna, the wind suddenly died. All day I had been pondering the marvel of how Roland could perceive what was hidden through the fine attunement of his heart, like a secret way of knowing the world. I longed to feel this also, though I doubted my talent in this area. I had heard of 'pure feeling' and knew, through Justin's writings, that this was the rope whereby one assaulted

Annapurna. “It’s the name of a book Justin once taught to his high-school English students,” Roland had said the night before; “Justin is helping those close to him scale their own personal peaks, each involving a unique and heroic inner conquest.” I had been struck by Roland’s effortless ability to articulate the mysteries of *The Context*.

The tall pines and trim lawn with azaleas bordering the porch were flooded with cool light from a dozen windows, though it was after midnight. Roland was in the front room, having invited me to see the videos of Justin Montclair Snow in action. Not wanting to waste any time, I had accepted, gladly, and found Roland on the deep blue sofa in front of a television whose setting was the very room we were now in. His slender body was not much taller than mine, yet he felt much larger. His eyes seemed to diminish the distance between us, increasing the power of his words in a confidence that made his movements effortless. He paused the video, asking beneath a brushy mustache and wire-rim spectacles if I would mind his watching with me.

“Ready to plunge into life? he asked with outgoing sobriety mixed with an enticing playfulness. His poise suggested that his words and the motions of his hands held meaning. I was soon to find him athletically awkward, but here he was a dancer.

I didn’t know where to sit, and went to a matching couch. Roland stopped me with his eyes, saying, “That couch is Justin’s. We save it for him so that he doesn’t have to sit in the stress of people in ignorance.”

So I took a nearby chair. I’ve read *Enlightenment Is*, I said, perhaps to not appear as an utter novice. Roland’s eyes deepened, sparkling as if such a response far excelled words. Still, I felt I wasn’t quite catching on. I looked about the room, otherwise bare, yet tasteful, the ceiling ornate above the large

oriental carpet of reds and blues. Over the fireplace was a Monet of dawn trees blazing purple and orange.

“It’s called Poplars,” Roland explained. “Monet could paint only seven minutes a morning when the light was exactly right. The man who owned the land they stood on was going to cut the trees down, so Monet bought the property—just so he could finish his painting!” The intimation was that I should be equally invested in life.

Roland unpaused the videotape of Justin’s day-long seminar held the preceding Sunday just for the Annapurnans. “Life is always happening around Justin Snow,” Roland had told me the night before, “but the seminar is the arena where his power can be expressed.”

The video was a piece of performance art, in which Justin spoke, joked, read poetry, moved the energy around in the room and in individuals, cajoling them, drawing them out, kidding, acting childish, then suddenly plunging into seriousness that the room grew taught as a sail. Roland stopped the video every so often to ask my perceptions.

Soon the tape presented a far less magnetic Roland being called to the microphone. There, in front of all his fellow climbers, he was being assailed by the man he called his “divine friend.”

“The microphone,” Roland whispered to me, “is where everything happens. Every motion in confrontation is meaningful. All of us around Justin want to be transformed—again and again, as long as it takes. Confrontation’s the key. It’s how we become aware of our beauty—the divine, and of our obstacles—the demonic.” He added that the results of confrontation were total: attitude, perception of the world, feelings, inner reality, behavior—all became “charged with divinity.”

I was definitely interested, though Justin was laying into Roland hard enough to make me think, “The Context is for heroes.” Yet, I told myself, that’s what I wanted.

“Every moment holds a divine/demonic tension,” Roland explained, his words fading as the camera panned a room full of people, every eye fixed on the World Teacher—as if each onlooker could just as easily have been the object of Justin’s completely unpredictable intensity. Justin had begun with loving words, completely confident and warm, but he had suddenly stepped up to a kind of vocal surgery as his wry smile became the augur of a grimace. His loving plea now incisive, his eyes just inches from Roland’s huge eyes, the World Teacher roared a demand for his friend to change. Even through the video, I felt the constant pressure growing scalpel-sharp. I watched transfixed, yet terrified that the transformation I knew I longed for meant a complete surrender of ego-bound self-centeredness.

Just then, as Justin surprised Roland with a pitcher of water between the eyes, grabbed his friend’s wet tie and pinned him to the wall, my companion whispered, “Justin will do whatever is required to get us to be real.” His wire-rim glasses having fallen to the ground, I watched Roland try to maintain eye contact. Then Justin let him go and, having seared into his being the seriousness of the moment, pushed verbally, “How are you, Roland? How are you! Roland! Answer me!...until his friend was in a fight of tears. Roaring, “Your demon’s gaining strength with each moment you remain silent!” Justin was a bulldog.

“I...I’m...I’m good, Justin,” Roland finally answered with whispered gut simplicity, which I could see required great energy. He was struggling with something.

“Good. Now sit down and don’t indulge in weakness!” Justin ordered.

“Thank you, Justin,” Roland said softly, straightening his tie as he turned to take his seat, where someone handed him his glasses.

I sensed that Roland, who had not interrupted that part of the tape, was guarded about what I had just viewed, wanting to make sure I understood. And so he said in words that pronounced themselves in his eyes before they were spoken, “It was as if a whole shell cracked around me. I let Justin into a part of myself I never thought I could reveal. He gave me just what I wanted,” Roland whispered, “just what I wanted.”

I, who during high-school in Chicago had cowered from football players and guys who wore Italian t-shirts under black leather jackets, was in awe that Roland could face such a challenge and then say it was just what he had wanted.

“You have a unique face, Bill. Justin says the entire story of a person’s soul is written there.” After what I took to be a compliment, Roland added, “Justin’s full of love, a blinding love stronger than even our demonic.” Then he became quiet, sober, staring his blue eyes into my own.

Still wondering how I would have handled the force of Justin’s demand, I paled to see that Roland’s gaze was now speaking to me in silence the same requirement just dramatized on videotape. I couldn’t move. To look away or frown or make a face was obviously not allowed. Getting up would have meant failure, an opportunity gone, a defeat—subtle, powerful, of unknown depth, unknown consequences.

Roland looked into me for a full minute, then said directly but quietly, “No. No. No, no.... No, no, no, no, no.... No, no, no, yes, no, no. No. No!. No...”

How this person I hardly knew could make such intimate commentary about the inside of my mind, which I myself could not see, I did not know. Yet, I felt his adjudications held inexpressible precision.

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

