

**The Wisdom
of
Sri Pompous Q McNinney**

Robert Archer

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Editor's Introduction

An editor's job is always difficult. There is the question of what to put in, and what to leave out. Out of all the documentation available to me, I have tried to select from those sources which I think best tells the story. The story, is of course, the story of the remarkable teachings of Sri Pompous Q McNinney, and the rise of the Church of Total Symmetry, in which they played such a prominent part. I have been lucky enough to be given access to the personal papers and diaries of some of the major actors in this drama. Particularly the diaries of Tenille Parker, who was to become the leader of the Church of Total Symmetry, and played a prominent part in the events which I recount. Vortan also has left us some notes, most importantly about his out of body experience that was a turning point in this story. Unfortunately, Sri Pompous himself wrote very little, apart from his famous discourses, many of which were actually transcribed from recordings made while he spoke to the devotees. So for the parts of the story more directly concerning Sri Pompous, I have had to rely on the reports of others. Many of the incidents I have recorded about Sri Pompous, particularly those earlier events, are taken from the stories told and retold among the devotees. In most cases, I have not been able to find anyone who remembers the original event in any detail, or cares to recount it! These stories, I have collected under the heading "Apocryphal", as I cannot ascertain how much is historical fact, and how much is teaching story. These apocryphal tales gradually develop into a more certain narrative, though there is no clear dividing line. I have, however, used my editorial prerogative to make an arbitrary end to the Apocrypha, and a beginning to the historical narrative. However, in many places, I have had to fill in the blanks with my own ideas of how things must have gone, to avoid there being gaps in the story.

I have tried to place these materials together in an approximate chronological order, beginning with the Apocrypha, and the historical narrative. Following the bulk of the historical narrative, are extracts from the diaries of Tenille Parker, and Vortan the Deceptor. The result, I hope, unfolds in a reasonably coherent fashion. I have finished up with the first three series of Sri Pompous's famous discourses, with the kind permission of the Academy of Happiness. There are many more discourses available, but these give a good flavor of Sri Pompous's essential teachings.

I hope that this small volume makes a contribution to the Spiritual Evolution of our planet, and I dedicate it to Sri Pompous Q McNinney, may his legacy continue to inspire and uplift the human family!

Robert Archer. 16th of April, 2000, Toronto.

The Apocrypha

"Nothing is perfect.
All things carry the seeds of their own destruction.
Within destruction is renewal.
Within De-construction is creation.
Within rigidity hides fear.
To believe is human.
To know what one believes is rare.
To act on one's beliefs is common.
To act on knowledge is rare.
To act is to invite a response.
Do you respond to my knowledge, my beliefs, or my actions?

Or none of the above?"

Sri Pompous Q. McNinney

Truth

Sri Pompous Q McNinney tells the following story:-

"Once when I was a young man, I happened to read in the back of a comic book that I could send away and for only \$2.99 receive a pair of x-ray vision glasses. Intrigued by the prospect of seeing people's underwear, I promptly raided the piggy bank, and sent for my pair. I discovered the glasses to be a cheap fraud. But I knew that x-ray vision was no less a possibility because these glasses didn't work for me. I turned to eastern mysticism, as it spoke of the third eye, and I felt that this might hold some promise in achieving my goal of x-ray vision. Not only would x-ray vision allow me to see girl's underwear, but I could become a super spy, seeing secret documents inside safe deposit boxes and so on. So I practiced meditation for many years, and in the course of life have become an old man. I'm no longer interested in girl's underwear or being a super spy. I never did develop x-ray vision. However I have a great recipe for savory millet dumplings in a white wine sauce."

Enlightenment

Sri Pompous looked up from his plate of rice crispies, and saw that a group of devotees were gazing at him expectantly, waiting for his pronouncement of Divine wisdom.

"Go away, you silly people," he expostulated lovingly. "Go and get your own rice crispies. Let me have my breakfast in peace."

"But Master," interjected Vortan the Deceptor, "I have a dozen quotes from as many holy scriptures that elevate the master-disciple relationship to a sacred and inviolable trust."

"Yes," replied Sri Pompous, "But not at breakfast time."

"The disciples are arguing amongst themselves about the precise location of the heaven of the Zanslucian lamas," persisted Vortan, "Surely it is your duty to settle the dispute so that harmony can be restored."

Sri Pompous merely picked up his spoon, in the bowl of which adhered a single rice crispie, damp with milk. Holding the handle of the spoon between the finger and thumb of his right hand, so that the bowl of the spoon was raised upwards, he used his left index finger to draw back the spoon in the manner of a catapult. At once he released his missile, and the soggy rice crispie flew through the air, landing on Vortan's forehead, precisely at the location of his third eye. There was an audible pop, and in that instant, Vortan the Deceptor became illuminated.

A Question

Sri Pompous stood at his window, gazing at the dark fury of the thunderstorm. The recently enlightened Vortan the Deceptor stood at his side, basking in the master's warmth and love. There were a few devotees standing in the back of the room, hushed and reverent in the presence of the two great Souls. Turning to Vortan, Sri Pompous remarked in his singsong yet strangely drone-like voice, "How like the thunderstorm is the breast of the unenlightened one."

"I should say it varies from day to day, from person to person," replied the Deceptor, grateful for the opportunity to display his Divine wisdom to the assembled students.

"It wasn't a question, smarty-pants," remarked Sri Pompous, "But an answer."

Spiritual Leadership

It came to pass that Sri Pompous found himself in one of the innumerable universes of the astral worlds, confronted with an infinite plane of gently steaming cow dung, glowing gently under two bright suns. A faint buzzing sound could be heard in the inner ear, as if a thousand tiny insects were singing their praises to the most high.

Sri pompous turned and surveyed what lay behind him, and noticed the presence of a handful of his close disciples, including Vortan the Deceptor, with his insatiable appetite for the absolute. On the face of the disciple was a most unbecoming grin.

"Lead us, Oh Master", intoned Vortan, "through the quagmire and into the regions of effulgent light"

"Certainly," replied Sri Pompous, "But on one condition. Let me borrow your shoes!"

Bypassing Death

Sri Pompous Q McNinney was having a picnic lunch with a group of his most devoted students, one fine summer day. They sat in the shade of a large tree, surrounded by the sounds of nature - birds, the soft rustle of wind in the leaves, and the tinkle of a nearby brook. Just as Sri Pompous was spreading salmon roe condiment on a cheese cracker, Vortan the Deceptor, one of his most senior students, said "Tell us about Bypassing Death, Oh Master, and entering the heavenly state directly."

Sri Pompous paused in the preparation of his fishy repast, and then, as if suddenly animated by Divine inspiration, held aloft the cracker smeared with roe.

"Take these fish eggs", began Sri Pompous. Immediately, Vortan reached up to take hold of the cracker.

"Metaphorically, you ninny," expostulated Sri Pompous. "Now, where was I?"

"Fish eggs," replied the Deceptor.

"Ah Yes. As yet undeveloped in consciousness, these eggs have a great potential for a full and hearty life as salmon in the sea. Yet, once eaten, their potential is unrealized. They have bypassed life, we might say, and yet it is nothing to them because of the undeveloped state of their consciousness. So be more concerned with developing your consciousness, so that life does not pass you by."

At that moment an obviously alien spacecraft landed in a flash of light and a shower of sparks accompanied by a deep throbbing sound. A being, about five feet tall, and silvery in appearance, emerged from a round aperture and floated to the ground. It strode purposely to where Sri Pompous was sitting, making a strange squelching noise as it walked, and leaving what appeared to be a damp trail. When it reached Sri Pompous, it snatched the cracker, which Sri Pompous had still been holding aloft, picked up the jar of salmon roe spread, and marched back to the spacecraft. As soon as the strange being re-entered, the craft disappeared in another flash of light, leaving nothing but a rolling rumble echoing through the hills.

"You missed your chance", said Sri Pompous, looking pointedly at Vortan the Deceptor.

The Presence of the Master

Sri Pompous had decided that in order to reach the true seekers, he would set up an office, with a shop window, in which could be displayed various uplifting Spiritual frescoes and models. The centerpiece was to be Vortan the Deceptor's model train set, which was to loop endlessly on its track to symbolize the tyranny of Karma and the wheel of births and deaths. It was arranged that Vortan could still play with it between the hours of 9pm and 12 midnight, when passing traffic had died down, during which time he would assume responsibility as night watchman.

On one such evening, as Vortan happily played with the miniature railway, there came a forthright knocking at the door, and Vortan opened it to reveal a plump middle aged fellow, heavily mustachioed, wearing thick framed glasses.

"What can I do for you?", inquired Vortan, wondering if this were perhaps a seeker after truth, hungrily waiting for his words of wisdom.

"I came to warn you," said the fellow. "I used to follow that master of yours. But he's nothing but a cheat and a fraud. I'm a Seventh Day Adventist now, and I've come to convince you to join me!"

Vortan was overcome by an intense desire to ring the fellow's neck, so overwhelming was his outrage at the insult to Sri Pompous.

"You shiftless scumbag!", expostulated the Deceptor, "you hardly deserve to breath the same air. Why, Sri Pompous is the pinnacle of Spirituality, and you're a dirty dog. Get out of here, before I lose my temper. Seventh Day Adventist! Bah!"

"Does your master teach you to insult and threaten others, and belittle their religion?" asked the fellow.

"Not normally," replied Vortan, exercising his razor sharp wit, "but I'm sure he'd make an exception for excrement like you." At this Vortan spat at the fellow's feet, and shouted "Be-gone, agent of Satan!"

Immediately, the fellow whipped off the false moustache, and removed his glasses, to reveal none other than Sri Pompous himself, with a pillow shoved inside his shirt.

"Good God," cried Vortan in mortification, "Sri Pompous!"

"None other," he replied, then turned and beckoned to a fellow across the street. "We thought we'd test out the new video camera," continued Sri Pompous with a smile. "Should be a hit at the devotee's Christmas party, don't you think?"

Non-Interference

The devotees were standing by the side of the river arguing loudly and heatedly. A small boy had fallen from the bank, and was at that very moment being swept away by the current, crying for help between gasps for breath. In spite of the mother's fretful pleas, Vortan the Deceptor argued that it was the boy's karma to fall into the river, and he for one was not about to interfere with the karma of another Soul.

And as the devotees argued the pros and cons, shouting, and poking fingers into one another's chests to underline the passion with which they made their points, the boy was being swept further and further away.

Suddenly there was a stentorian cry, cutting through the arguments, and the group of spiritual aspirants turned to see Sri Pompous come running down the hill at a blistering pace. He had immediately sized up the situation, and was issuing instructions at a shout.

"Quick, you two, down to the bridge with me. Vortan and Zebidee, grab those tree branches, and follow us!". Sri Pompous then raced off at full gallop for the bridge, with the devotees in hot pursuit.

As they got to the bridge, he shouted, "Use the tree branches to fish us out at the bend", and leapt into the current, just as the struggling boy was passing underneath. The devotees saw him grab the boy, and hold his head up above the water, as the current swept them downstream. Sri Pompous tried to angle across the current towards the bend he had indicated, at which point a sandbank jutted out into the stream.

Meanwhile the devotees had raced ahead on the bank, and by the time Sri Pompous and the boy reached the bend, the devotees had formed a human chain out into the current, extended with the tree branches, which Sri Pompous was able to grab as he floated past.

When the boy, wet and frightened, but none the worse for wear, had been returned to his mother, Vortan the Deceptor, looking somewhat sullen, asked, "But what about the Law of Non-Interference? Why only yesterday you gave a lengthy discourse about it, when Zebidee accused me of bossing Gerard around. Surely we've taken on the little boy's karma in rescuing him from certain drowning. And the mother's and family's grief and heartache, which is now instead delight. Surely we've mucked up a bunch of karmic ledgers, and will have to pay the price."

"God speaks through the heart," replied Sri Pompous. "Man speaks through laws."

The Servant

Sri Pompous was enjoying a late Sunday morning brunch at the new office, trying to come up with some ideas for his weekly discourse to the devotees. But for once in his life, he was completely without inspiration. He tried several different mantras, but no matter what he did, his consciousness stayed earthbound, and the Divine nectar of truth stubbornly refused to flow. He looked at a number of topics, such as the laws of karma and non-interference, methods and practices for the expansion of consciousness, travels in the splendid worlds of pure light and sound, the necessity of giving love, and so on. But on this particular day, each and every topic seemed drab and dull.

Inexorably, the appointed time grew closer, and still no subject of discourse presented itself. Finally, the hour arrived, and as the devotees settled expectantly into their seats, Sri Pompous walked up to the podium.

"I'm afraid I've misled you all," said Sri Pompous. "I'm not a Master at all. I am a servant. Divine Spirit is my master, and would be yours too, if you weren't so busy seeking cheap spiritual thrills."

At this Vortan the Deceptor jumped to his feet, shouting, "I've never been so insulted in all my life. After all I've done for you! You've no right to speak so plainly, so insultingly, about your devoted followers! Cheap spiritual thrills indeed." Then he stormed from the room, saying, "I'll go find a master who doesn't insult me."

Sri Pompous remained silent, but his face fell somewhat at this dramatic turn. Then Gerard hesitatingly got to his feet, saying, "Now that Vortan's gone, can I be your right hand devotee?"

"How good are you at scrabble?" asked Sri Pompous.

The Historical Narrative

Starting Religions

Sri Pompous had been a little bored since Vortan the Deceptor's dramatic decision to find another teacher. The other devotees were sincere and disciplined, it was true, but Sri Pompous couldn't help feeling they were, to be brutally blunt, boring. Where was the passion, the pig-headed willingness to dive into things with little thought, throwing caution to the winds? Could such people storm the ramparts of heaven and win the ultimate prize of the Divine consciousness?

Sri Pompous was mulling over these thoughts, when Gerard burst into the room excitedly.

"Guess what," he blurted excitedly, "Vortan has declared himself to be the Mouthpiece of the Infinite, and is starting up a new religion!"

"How extraordinary," replied Sri Pompous. "And without any sci-fi publishing credits!"

"He's distributing these handbills." said Gerard, handing over a small yellow sheet.

"Vortan the Deceptor," read Sri Pompous, "Divinely Inspired Mouthpiece of the Infinite, invites you to the founding meeting of his new religion, the Path of Symmetrical Totality. Sri Vortan teaches tolerance, compassion, and his very presence inspires illumination of the highest order in those ready to receive the Divine gifts. Election of officials and office bearers will follow Sri Vortan's inaugural speech entitled, 'The Law of non-interference, and how it can make you one million dollars.'"

"Well," said Sri Pompous, "There's nothing else for it. We'll just have to go along and see what he's up to."

In fact, much to Vortan's chagrin, Sri Pompous, Gerard, Zebidee, and several other of Sri Pompous's devotees were by far the largest group amongst the handful of people who turned up for the meeting. They sat politely through Vortan's speech, and some desultory questions until they came to the election of office bearers. Using their numbers, Gerard was elected chief executive officer, Zebidee was elected chief executive, recruitment, and the other devotees all got seats on the doctrinal committee. Then Sri Pompous rose to his feet, and Gerard, who as chief executive officer had taken the chair, gave him the floor.

"I'd like to move a motion that we change the name of the religion from the Path of Symmetrical Totality, to the Path of Total Symmetry" intoned Sri Pompous in his most serious voice.

The motion was carried, albeit with the dissent of Vortan, which was duly noted in the minutes, and having thus stamped his mark on the proceedings, Sri Pompous departed, and the meeting was closed.

Plagiarism.

Now that Vortan the Deceptor had started up his new religion, Sri Pompous found that the devotees were increasingly busy with all the daily trivia associated with any such enterprise. There were handbills to design and distribute, public meetings to be organized and attended, mailing lists to be drawn up and sorted, bank accounts to be opened and closed in foreign countries, lawyers and public relations experts to be

consulted, and so on. Vortan the Deceptor was happily basking in the admiration of his quickly growing congregation, and had just published his first book, entitled, “God-Realization or Bust”, which was selling like hotcakes to the new members of the Path of Total Symmetry.

So, finding himself with little to do, Sri Pompous decided to take a holiday from the rigors of mastership. He attached his false mustache, donned his Calvin Klein after-dinner wear, slipped on a pair of heavy horn-rimmed glasses, and, thus disguised, headed down to the local mini-golf franchise. As fortune would have it, Sri Pompous found himself playing behind none other than Vortan the Deceptor and a certain Jeremy Quagly, an official in The Path of Total Symmetry, and one of Sri Pompous’s devotees. The two were arguing heatedly, though they kept their voices to a whisper.

“He’s sure to find out,” Quagly was insisting. “You can’t just copy all his speeches like that. It’s wrong. It’s deceitful. Don’t you have any respect for the congregation?”

“Bah!”, expostulated the Deceptor. “I need to get another book out pronto. We’ve got thousands of hungry spiritual seekers clamoring for more. We have to feed them, or they’ll take their hunger elsewhere.”

“Yes, but just stealing Sri Pompous’s speeches. What if he finds out. What if he sues us?”

“Look, I’ve consulted the lawyers. Those speeches were in the public domain. Besides, they were wasted on a handful of devotees. We’re making them available to thousands, all over the world!”

Sri Pompous became very thoughtful after over-hearing this conversation. He thought of whipping off the mustache and glasses, and jumping into the fray with a shout of “Caught you, you scoundrels!”

Instead, he hurried home, fired up the word-processor, and began to write a new series of discourses. A third book, he realized, would soon be necessary.

Publicity

Since the runaway success of his new religion, Vortan the Deceptor had decided that in order to project the appearance of a Spiritual Leader of stature and integrity, certain changes needed to be made. He retained a firm of public relations consultants, and on their professional recommendation, he began to wear expensive Saville Row suits, and immaculately polished Italian leather shoes. His public appearances became carefully controlled and orchestrated affairs, in which miraculous healings were simulated by handsomely paid members of Vortan’s personal “Missionary Squad”. A kind of mild public hysteria began to build around these “seed healings”, which soon spread to the more unbalanced members of the crowd, and before long, Vortan found himself the center of a frenzied mob of weeping, sobbing and shouting people wherever he went. People were crushed in the throng as they strove to touch him as he walked by, and many were left prostrate in the street to be collected by emergency service workers and treated for shock, contusions, broken bones and bloody noses.

It wasn’t long before the city authorities began to take notice, and passed an ordinance preventing public religious gatherings without 30 days notice. They also required the payment of a license fee, which included a hefty insurance premium, to cover injuries sustained by members of the public.

On the advice of his public relations consultants, Vortan issued a press release, with the following headline, “City declares war on religious Freedom!”, and was quickly the center of a nationwide media controversy. Membership in the Path of Total Symmetry grew by leaps and bounds as Vortan’s PR team found evidence of bigotry and intolerance on the part of no less than seven different city councilors, including the mayor, and wasted no time in releasing it to the press. Some headlines from papers included

“City Cans Kooky Cult”

“Suited Saint in City Witch Hunt”
“Meddling Mayor Fights Cultists”
“Crusading Cult a Public Menace”

This coincided with a major advertising campaign which Vortan personally authorized, involving full page spreads in all the major dailies.

At the height of the frenzy, Sri Pompous was approached by a reporter from the Daily Admonisher, and asked for an interview.

“I understand that Vortan the Deceptor, leader of the Path of Total Symmetry, was once a student of yours,” began the journalist.

“Ever tried teaching a brick?” replied Sri Pompous.

“Are you saying that he was a poor student?”

“Brains the size of a pea, in a head the size of an elephant’s butt!”

“What about the thousands who claim miraculous healings?”

“Don’t give up your health insurance!”

“You seem to me like a jealous and cynical old man, bitter about the success of a former student!”

“You seem to me like a star-struck young fool ready to be fleeced by the first smooth talking cockroach that comes along!”

“How can you just invalidate the beliefs and experiences of tens of thousands of satisfied followers?”

“By showing them the truth!”, replied Sri Pompous with a grin. “Any thing else you want to know?”

The Master’s Image

In due time the public hysteria surrounding the Path of Total Symmetry died away, and when Vortan the Deceptor and his vice-president for recruitment took stock of the situation, they found that they had achieved no less than 300,000 subscriptions in the space of a few months. Each of course would need to be provided with a monthly mailing, and they decided that it was high time to develop a catalog of Total Symmetry Merchandise which the devotees could buy. So Vortan commissioned a 5th Avenue fashion consultant to design a range of jewelry, pendants, fashion T-shirts, and designer saris for sale to the devotees. Each would of course be imbued with Vortan the Deceptors’ effulgent vibrations, and along with several pictures of him in various serious looking poses, would provide just the impetus needed by truth seekers to achieve an illuminated state.

Now it so happened that this designer was an old friend of Sri Pompous Q McNinney going back to his civil service days. Knowing of the previous association between Sri Pompous and Vortan the Deceptor, the designer, whose name was Jamison Lambert, decided to give Sri Pompous a call.

“Hello Pompous you old devil,” he said into the phone when Sri Pompous answered. “It’s Jamison Lambert from New York City. Listen I’ve got this Vortan the Deceptor fellow wanting me to do him a line of merchandise for his Total Symmetry Thingy. Wasn’t he one of your fellows?”

Sri Pompous laughed heartily, replying “Yes, yes, he’s done rather well with his religion hasn’t he?”

“Extraordinary success for someone who strikes me as about enlightened as a piece of ear wax”

Sri Pompous guffawed uproariously, saying “God loves ear wax no less than the saint”

“And no more than the boil on a bishops butt-cheek” replied Jamison, and informed Sri Pompous of the minutiae of the designs that Vortan had requested.

“You know what’s missing?” asked Sri Pompous, after a pause for reflection. “Some visages of other masters. We can’t have everyone focussing only on images of Vortan, it’ll send them all bananas!”

So they cooked up a plan to include the visages of several other Masters and Saints in the Pantheon of the Path of Total Symmetry. The images were to be derived by adding suitable saint-like hairstyles to the publicity photos of old Hollywood actors, who according to Sri Pompous, were used to having thousands of people going gaga over them. It simply remained for Jamison to sell the idea to Vortan the Deceptor. Although his vanity was at first against the idea, it was explained that the devotees, instead of buying one photograph, could now buy six or seven. And explained this way, Vortan soon saw the sense in the idea. So the Path of Total Symmetry welcomed a phalanx of high powered Spiritual Adepts, Sri Clintus Maximus, who according to legend was responsible for the invention of the Roman Calendar, Sri Bogarz Hum, the Tibetan Master whose recipe for pork chops was said to instantly bring enlightenment, Sri Belog Lugash said to have lived 5000 years in the same physical body, and Sri Clarkz Gablarz, said to be able to transform any material object into yellow curtains.

Inspiration

Sri Pompous had been diligently turning out study notes now for some months for his small band of devoted followers. Vortan the Deceptor had been secretly copying them, and publishing them in book form under his own name. They were a great success, and attracted many truth seekers to the Path of Total Symmetry. However the strain of this extended period of Spiritual Creativity was beginning to tell on Sri Pompous. His normal modus operandi was to sit down at the computer keyboard, chant one of the 17 holy names of God for 30 seconds or so, and then the unspeakable truth would flow forth from his fingertips onto the page. Sri Pompous observed the gradually increasing difficulty of his writings, and their gradually declining energetic content, but as usual, put his faith in the supreme one to solve this apparent problem.

One morning, nothing at all would come. Sri Pompous stared blankly at the computer screen. Feeling overcome by tiredness, he thought perhaps a quick nap would revitalize his creative spark, so he allowed his head to slump forward, till it was resting forehead down on the keyboard, and shut his eyes. Instantly he found himself in Soul form, standing before a great deity, who appeared to be King Neptune, holding the famous trine, and with the odd bit of seaweed draped about his clothing. There was the whiff of an invigorating odor, something between fresh sea air, and fish being grilled.

“I should rather think you’ve been over-doing it,” said Neptune in a surprisingly effete South London accent.

Sri Pompous nodded, somewhat glumly for an avatar.

“Have a look here,” said Neptune, a ship’s porthole suddenly appearing in front of Sri Pompous. Through it he could see a fishing trawler on a calm bay. It was hauling up its nets. However when it emptied them on the deck, all that appeared was a solitary prawn and an old boot. The scene dissolved, and in its place was a large gothic building. It seemed to zoom up to the window, and suddenly Sri Pompous was inside a large hall lined with books of every description. He reached up, and took one from the shelf. It was an elegantly leather bound volume with gold leaf lettering proclaiming itself to be ‘The Path of Enlightenment,’ by Edward Spavin.

With this Sri Pompous found himself wide-awake, and he jerked his head up feeling as if an electric shock was going through his being. Giving thanks to the Supreme One, he reached for his copy of the self-same title, which was on a bookshelf above his desk, opened it at page one, and began transcribing. Sri Pompous soon realized that certain improvements could be made, and that many long-winded paragraphs of little significance could be left out. Nevertheless, it was good for quite a few chapters, which he dispatched with his usual enthusiasm and efficiency, and which duly passed into Vortan the Deceptor's new opus for the Path of Total Symmetry.

Jewels in the Mud

Things were going very well down at the headquarters of the Path of Total Symmetry. The balance sheet was looking so healthy, that Vortan the Deceptor decided to base himself in Las Vegas, on the advice of his chief accountant, a dour and serious man who went by the name of Geoffrey Thursby. Here excess funds could be very easily converted to official liquidity with the aid of one of the many gambling establishments in that city, thus bypassing the necessity of taxation. This was necessary because of Vortan's unwillingness, or inability, to grasp the notion of a not-for-profit organization, which would have attracted a tax-free status. However this would have necessitated toning down Vortan's complete control over the organization, and unfettered enjoyment of the proceeds. Which, Vortan insisted, was absolutely critical in this delicate phase of development of what Vortan had recently begun calling the Church of Total Symmetry, Religion of Righteous Devotion to the Mystic Fire. There were signs that Vortan was becoming rather unbalanced by his success. In addition to brooking no disagreement for his plans, he began to refuse to see any of his old friends who'd known him in his pre pontifical phase. With the aid of a bevy of Las Vegas Lawyers, he staged a coup, and ejected from their positions in the organization all of Sri Vortan's devotees, replacing them with paid off stooges and yes-men. It was at this stage that Vortan adopted the title of Sri Vortan the Preceptor, guardian of the Mystic Fire, and claimed to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, issuing press releases stating that the mainstream Christian churches had misunderstood his teachings, which were now available in their pure form for the first time in 2000 years. He also claimed, at different times, to be a reincarnation of Pythagoras, Gautama Buddha, King Henry the Eighth, and Reg Perry, little known inventor of a herbal wart remedy, which had faded into obscurity until revived and marketed through the Church of Total Symmetry.

All of this Sri Pompous observed with a growing sense of disquiet. But reassured himself that at least the followers were being exposed to genuine spiritual insights through his writings. But he began to wonder where it was all leading too, and whether he had perhaps been too quick to supply Vortan with the spiritual writings that were the foundation of his success.

It was at this stage that Vortan announced that he was going to get married, and announced his search for the perfect bride to help him with his mission. Every eligible woman in the membership, and quite a considerable number of ineligible ones applied for the position, and Vortan embarked on a long and costly selection process, aided by a firm of management consultants. This involved a number of jaunts to various spots in the Caribbean with potential partners, and all in all the process looked set to go on indefinitely. However, the accounts started looking decidedly shaky with the necessity of buying off the unsuccessful young women, and so Vortan was prevailed upon to make his selection, and in due course, the marriage was celebrated in an exclusive ceremony which spawned a large range of merchandising opportunities. New photos of the happy couple, bearing the mimeographed signature of both Vortan and his new wife sold extremely well. The Church of Total Symmetry marriage kit was also a big seller, and for an annual fee, one could become an official Church of Total Symmetry marriage celebrant.

The new bride's name was Doreen McHugh, and she was a true believer, having read all of the Church's materials several times. Vortan thought that this merely demonstrated her gullible simplicity, ensuring it would be easy to keep her in the dark about his complete spiritual fraudulence. Instead, however, it demonstrated a keen spiritual perceptiveness, discerning the inherent truth of Sri Pompous's discourses.

And so it wasn't long before Doreen began to see through Vortan's elaborate scams and complete disdain for his followers, and she soon traced the source of the church's writings back to Sri Pompous.

Thus it was that Sri Pompous found himself entertaining the new bride of Vortan the Deceptor.

"I thought I was marrying a holy man. Instead I married a complete scumbag. The whole church is a complete fraud. I can't believe I was so deluded. What a complete nitwit I was."

"Well," said Sri Pompous, "I guess it's better to know the truth sooner rather than later."

"Why did you let him do it?"

"It was you, and all the other followers who let him do it. I've just hidden jewels in the mud."

Surrender to the Guru

Having discovered the awful truth of Vortan's shameless misuse of his followers' gullibility, Doreen, Vortan's new wife, was terribly angry. This alternated with a severe depression. Yet somehow, she found herself turning to the teachings so fraudulently distributed through the Church of Total Symmetry, for comfort and inspiration. She would shut herself in her room, amidst great piles of the writings, and pour through them, feeling as she did, a great upliftment of spirit, and perceiving things so simply and clearly. Yet the moment she stopped her reading, her emotions of anger and despair would return as strongly as ever. A constant litany was going through her mind, such as, "That utter ass-hole. That scumbag. He's such a fraud and phony. Why he's utterly abused the privilege of life. He doesn't deserve to live" and so on in a similar vein, all the while nursing a hot bitter lump in the pit of her stomach.

In desperation she decided to consult Sri Pompous, in the hope that he may be able help her overcome this destructive state of negativity.

Sri Pompous at this time, was living in a small but comfortable bed sitter just the right distance from shops, transport, and downtown. He agreed to meet Doreen in the nearby Café Expressohead, which Sri Pompous frequented largely because of the fresh vegetable juices and the decaf Soyacino.

"I don't really want to kill him," said Doreen. "It's just that every time I think of what he's done to me, I want to kill him."

Sri Pompous Just nodded sagely.

"If it wasn't for your discourses Sri Pompous, I should be at my wits' end, and don't know what I would do," carried on the poor woman, and burst into tears. Luckily Sri Pompous had remembered to bring a clean handkerchief, even though he very rarely suffered from nasal congestion, and when Doreen's rending sobs died down a bit, he offered it to her to wipe her eyes and blow her nose.

"I have a confession to make" said Sri Pompous gently, "I've had a mental block these last few months, so all the recent discourses I've just caddged out of this little volume here." He was holding up a small leather bound book entitled "The Path of the Masters", by Julian Johnson. "Here, why don't you have it. I won't be needing it anymore. I've gone on to "Chicken Soup for the Soul" now."

Doreen is cured.

It would be an understatement to say that Doreen was stunned by Sri Pompous's revelation of his plagiarism. As she sat across from Sri Pompous, it was as if all her expectations were turned on their head, and for a second her mind went completely blank. She was conscious of nothing except the smiling face of Sri Pompous across the table from her, with the twinkle in his eye, and the slightly mischievous grin on his face. In that moment, a great surge of warmth sprang up from deep within her, and before she knew it both she and Sri Pompous were laughing until their sides ached. Every now and again, Sri Pompous would lift up the book, and gesticulate with it wildly, amidst great gales of infectious laughter. The other people in the café were staring curiously at the two, and many themselves began to chuckle, so infectious was the mirth of Sri Pompous.

Presently however, the two composed themselves, and ordered another round of carrot juices. Doreen found that she no longer harbored any ill feeling for Vortan. He now seemed to her a rather pathetic creature, caught in a web of circumstances completely out of his control, while fondly imagining himself to be the author of his destiny. To her surprise, she found that she felt a little sorry for him, and the come-uppance that was surely heading his way.

Vortan comes unstuck

Now Doreen very much enjoyed reading the little book given to her by Sri Pompous. It was very interesting to read the original of some of his discourses, and note how he had changed some of the terminology here and there, and altered the emphasis on certain key points. And there was much more to the book that Sri Pompous hadn't transcribed, and these new sections Doreen devoured voraciously. She was so captivated by the little volume that she carried it with her everywhere, so that she could dip into it at every spare moment. Then, as is often the case when spiritual forces beyond our comprehension are at work, the book disappeared. Doreen had left it on a couch in the Solarium at Church of Total Symmetry headquarters, when she went in for a spa and sauna. The cleaners had been through, and mistaken it for a volume borrowed from the central reading room, to which it was returned. Now it happened that the reading room was administered by a fellow called Johnson Nudibranch, who was dismayed to find no identifying catalogue numbers on the volume in question, and so began to flick through it in search of identifying markings. Johnson was a devoted follower of the Church, and had studied industriously all the publications emanating from the Church's central offices. He was therefore shocked and horrified to find that some of his most cherished study materials appeared almost word for word in the small volume before him. His first reaction was to think that some scoundrel had cadged Vortan the Preceptor's discourses to church members, and was here publishing them under his own name to make a dishonest profit. However upon checking the publication date, he noted that the book had been in print for almost thirty years.

The unspeakable gradually dawned upon him. The scoundrel in question could be no other than Vortan the Deceptor, founder of the Church of Total Symmetry, the man who he had idolized - and the man to whose great spiritual mission he had devoted all his spare time, chiefly by working as a volunteer in the Church's reading room.

He immediately exited the Church's complex, never to return, and headed straight home. Now Johnson Nudibranch had recently connected himself to the Internet, and had been carefully and lovingly building a web page devoted to the ineffable truths revealed by the Church of Total Symmetry. He now completely erased the glowing accolades he had painstakingly collected from the membership, and instead printed word for word comparisons of Vortan's discourses with the almost identical tracts from the original work. The page was adorned with the headline "Fraudulent Guru dupes Church Membership" and the sub title "Plagiarism Scandal rocks Church of Total Symmetry."

In a matter of days, the story had been picked up by the tabloids, and Vortan the Deceptor was deluged by reporters from newspapers and television wanting to know how he responded to the allegations.

Vortan Responds

Vortan immediately called a war counsel of his most trusted aides to come up with a strategy to counteract the adverse publicity. They hired a firm of corporate lawyers and retained a media consultant. Vortan paced backwards and forwards in the church's main conference room, cursing loudly all the while. The main recipient of his curses and ill will, was Sri Pompous McNinney, who Vortan now blamed for this latest problem which threatened the foundations of his empire. "That lazy good for nothing scoundrel," he cursed and spat, "taking a free ride on the work of others while pretending to be a guru. Its obscene. What a fraud. What a devil. Holy man my arse," and so on in a similar vein. "What a fool I was to put my trust in him."

In the end, the following strategy was decided upon. The worst offending discourses and pamphlets were withdrawn from circulation, and anyone who said anything about it immediately found themselves involved in a lawsuit. Meanwhile, the paid up members of the church were told how the evil one delighted in sowing doubt and uncertainty in the mind of the devotee through these malicious stories without foundation. They were exhorted to resist all these evil snares, whose sole purpose was to make them doubt the teachings, and leave the Path of Total Symmetry, which would result in all kinds of spiritual calamities. Vortan and his aides had great fun concocting a range of terrible fates for those of so little faith that they found themselves doubting the Church and its leadership. They invented the "Karma Kazump", which afflicted those weak souls foolish enough to part company with the church. It consisted of all the pent up misfortunes that had been kept at bay through the spiritual intervention of Vortan's guruship, returning in one fell swoop, and making the ex devotee's life a torrid misery of grief and ill-luck. Not content with this, Vortan warned of "Wandering Despair". This referred to the unfortunate condition of those so stupid as to discard the true teachings, thus dooming themselves to a life of aimless searching, afflicted with constant unhappiness, and a black despair caused by permanent separation from the Divine. And if these two evil consequences were insufficient to convince a devotee to stay committed, then Vortan sent in the councilors. They were specially trained in undermining independence of thought, and sowing doubt and confusion. The end result was that very few people actually ended up leaving the Church of Total Symmetry, and those who did suffered all types of psychiatric conditions. Which only served to emphasize Vortan's dire warnings of the Karma Kazump.

Vortan was pleased with the way he had handled such a potentially damaging situation. However, he resolved to use no more of Sri Pompous's writings. Instead he engaged several translators skilled in Tibetan, Persian, and Sanskrit, and paid them to make translations of little known and previously untranslated spiritual works. He then got his advertising agency to work them over, using focus groups to weed out unpopular passages, and copywriters to vamp up the language and make it more exciting and relevant to the modern day. After this treatment, he assured himself that no-one would be able to trace the origin of his future writings.

However, a small group of committed truth seekers within the church were not duped by Vortan's maneuvers, and committed themselves to exposing his fraud, ejecting him from the Church, and replacing him with the true spiritual leadership of Sri Pompous Q McNinney. This critical fact however, they neglected to mention to the very man about whom their plans revolved, Sri Pompous himself!

A Spiritual Coup

Doreen McHugh, Vortan's wife, was a pivotal member of the conspirators who planned to overthrow Vortan's despotic control of the Church, and by degrees, managed to become a signatory on several key bank accounts and attain directorships on key church boards. In due course, the moment to strike came, Vortan was deposed, locks were changed, assets moved, and a deputation of the conspirators approached Sri Pompous, triumphantly acclaiming him their new spiritual leader.

"Good God," declared Sri Pompous. "What on earth makes you think I want to have anything to do with the Church of Total Symmetry?"

“But please,” insisted Doreen, “We need someone of your stature and integrity to set the Church right and bring spiritual purity back into the teachings.”

Sri Pompous just laughed, saying, “It’s your church. You fix it up. I’m too busy anyway. I just bought into a dogwash franchise.”

The Dogwash

Sri Pompous was very busy with his new business. He’d grown tired of the incessant squabbles and politics of the ashram, and the donors who paraded around imagining they had somehow become virtuous through their substantial donations to its upkeep, while still carrying on like the unethical scoundrels that they were. So Sri Pompous had decided that the ashram was no longer a suitable vehicle for his spiritual mission, and wasted no time in disbanding it, selling off its assets, and paying off its creditors. With the small amount that was left over, he invested in a dog-wash business, and was very pleased with how things were turning out.

The only bothersome circumstance was that members of the Church of Total Symmetry kept accosting him whenever he ventured out on a job, demanding sermons, healings, dispensations, and all the paraphernalia of guru-ship, like so many blood-sucking leeches intent on draining him of the very life essence that kept him together body and soul.

Characteristically, Sri Pompous approached this inconvenience stoically, and even managed to keep a sense of humor about it. However the dog-wash customers didn’t have quite the same tolerance, and Sri Pompous soon found himself losing business. The bills began to pile up, and things were looking serious. He couldn’t keep up his franchise fees, and so his right to use the “Pooch-o-matic” name was rescinded. However, Sri Pompous had invested all his resources in the trailer with its hoses, brushes and little tank.

With the last of his cash reserves, Sri Pompous had the dogwash trailer repainted, and the logo “Guru-wash” emblazoned on the side. In smaller print, he had painted “We purify body and Soul”. Now when accosted by hopefuls from the Church of Total Symmetry, he charged them \$10 for a thorough dousing, with \$2 extra for aromatherepy scents in the final rinse. He would answer questions of a spiritual nature only after the inquirer was thoroughly purified. Of course there were those who couldn’t afford his fee, reasonable though it was, and these he washed for free. However, this became a problem, because these lucky recipients of his charity began to hang around, eager to do some task to repay his generosity.

It became so bad, that wherever he went, a great crowd of no-hopers and derelicts would follow in his wake, crying out sporadically their desire to assist him in some way. Finally, he struck upon the solution - Guru wash franchises. To each of these derelicts he assigned a guru-wash territory, advanced them the money to buy their own trailer, and set them up in their own business. To ensure that each business flourished, he had printed up thousands of small cards with a different inspirational saying and a photograph of his smiling face, which was given to each washee after their dousing.

Soon the franchise fees were rolling in, and Sri Pompous had a steady income. He retired from actively getting out in the street with his own wash trailer, and instead, concentrated on visiting each of the new territories, and working on the job with each of his franchisees, who were now earning very decent livings.

Sri Pompous was struck by how many people felt the need for spiritual purification, and noted how similar his practice was to good old fashioned baptism. So he struck a deal with a mail order college, and his franchisees, after suitable in house training, became accredited pastors with the international pan-Christian inter-denominational mail-order university. They were then entitled to add the words baptism and forgiveness of sins to their wash trailers, and business boomed. Sri Pompous insisted on maintaining the rates at affordable levels for the bulk of the population, and insisted that each franchisee practice Christian charity by performing a small percentage of baptisms at no charge for needy individuals.

Once the word baptism was added to the business, it was as if the floodgates were opened. It seemed people were very suspicious of gurus and spiritual purification, but once the familiar Christian terminology was used, people took to it in leaps and bounds.

However the members of the Church of Total Symmetry were entirely disgruntled by this turn of events. Those same zealous members who had previously begged him to step into the leadership position in the Church, promptly withdrew their invitation, saying that someone who practiced such a low brow commercial Christianity was entirely unsuitable as the leader of the Church of Total Symmetry. They began a campaign of innuendo and smear tactics against him and his guru-wash baptism business. They accused him of crass commercialization of spirituality. And they reinstated Vortan the Deceptor as the Supreme Preceptor of the Church of Total Symmetry. Of course there were several more enlightened members of this group who tried valiantly to resist this train of events, chief of whom was Doreen, Vortan's wife, and one of Sri Pompous's greatest fans. However it was to no avail, and much to Doreen's disgust, she found Vortan the Deceptor once again in control of the church, and herself stripped of all power and influence!

However, a curious thing happened. The more the Church of Total Symmetry tried to denigrate and demonize Sri Pompous and his business, the more its members left the Church, and began to flock to Sri Pompous's newly instituted guru-wash seminars. The seminars could be attended only by those certified pure by a recognized guru-wash franchisee, normally after a ten week course of bi-weekly dousings. There, Sri Pompous lectured, spoke, preached, and presided over a series of personal growth workshops for a modest fee.

At one of these seminars, which were now operating every weekend in a different city, a reporter had decide to do a story, and had purchased his course of purifications, with the sole intention of exposing Sri Pompous's "fraud". At the end of Sri Pompous's Saturday evening lecture, when Sri Pompous opened the floor to audience questions, the reporter piped up and asked,

"Many consider your crass commercialization of religion offensive. How do you answer their claims that you are just playing on people's weaknesses for your own gain?"

There was an immediate outcry amongst the audience, which could easily have turned nasty. But Sri Pompous silenced them with a wave of his hand. "I am playing on people's weaknesses," Sri Pompous replied, "But it's for their own gain, not mine."

"Do you honestly expect people to believe that?" asked the reporter.

"Of course not!" replied Sri Pompous. "But they believe it anyway."

"I've taken your course of spiritual purification, and its made no difference to me", continued the reporter in his surly manner.

"Well, you wasted your money, then", said Sri Pompous.

"Everyone in this room has wasted their money on a load of bunkum," spat out the reporter.

"Every time they bought the morning newspaper", Sri Pompous rejoined, to the sound of merriment from the genuine aspirants.

"I aim to expose you for the charlatan and con man that you are", said the newspaperman with a cold steely voice.

"And I aim to give every customer of Guru-wash an experience of spiritual purification, or their money back, starting with you. Now if you'll just produce your receipt, I'll be more than happy to refund you in full"

At this, the reporter looked even more sullen and stalked from the room.

The membership drive.

While Sri Pompous's Guru-Wash franchise was thriving and growing, the Church of Total Symmetry was losing more members than it was signing up new recruits. The situation became so serious that Vortan called a special meeting, which he called his "war cabinet".

"Things are grim", he began, "The forces of evil are gaining the upper hand. Recognizing the terrible threat that the Church of Total Symmetry poses to his dominion over the hearts of all in the material plane, Satan has mobilized his legions of black angels against us. At this very moment, they are riding the four corners of the globe, turning people against the true teachings of the Church of Total Symmetry, and causing them to believe in pale imitations such as Guru-Wash Incorporated. We must mobilize our own spiritual army, the Warriors of the True Light, whose task is to win Souls for the Preceptor, to free them from the snares of the Evil One, and ensure their salvation by signing them up for our Discourse Series. Starting today, I commend you all to sign up for our special "Warriors of the Light" program, which will teach you special techniques for saving those deluded Souls from their own folly. Remember, people cannot be trusted to escape the snares of Satan on their own. They need you to guide them to the Church of Total Symmetry. No other teaching can teach them how to overcome the evil aspects of their own nature. The Church of Total Symmetry is the only way that Satan can be vanquished, and the Soul purified. To teach otherwise is to merely confirm the grasp of Satan on ones mind and heart."

By the means of such inspirational and enthusiastic speeches, quite a few of the less discriminating church members became possessed by a zealous urge to convert all people they encountered. No means was considered too intrusive when it came to saving people from themselves. And soon enough, the membership of the Church of Total Symmetry began to grow again. However, the new members were now of quite a different intellectual and emotional makeup to the original membership. Generally, they were those who harbored at the base of their personalities an unreasoning and baseless fear, together with a sense of deep and abiding worthlessness. These people then seized on the sense of purpose and direction provided by the Church's new missionary activities. Through the process of winning converts they were able to circumvent their deep lack of self-esteem, masking it with a sense of spiritual superiority. This process, of course, completely shielded them from any spiritual growth what so ever. But since church members received Grace in Heaven for each convert, this hardly mattered, and so the Church of Total Symmetry was back in the black.

However the new membership presented Vortan the Deceptor with another problem. They were unable to make any sense out of the Church's Discourses, written or caged, as you will remember, in the most part by Sri Pompous. These new members were so dull witted that that their eyes glazed over after only a few lines. So Vortan was forced to re-write his discourse series for this new audience, considerably simplifying things, and leaving out all the big words. In the end, he acquired some old Sunday School Catechisms for primary school kids, and spiced them up a bit with some missionary zeal, and they sold like hot cakes.

The great debate

One evening, as Sri Pompous was cutting his toenails in front of the TV, one of the clippings flew off into the air, and struck the TV screen right smack in the middle, with an audible ping. Sri Pompous's attention was suddenly drawn to the TV screen, which had been on because his flat-mate had been watching the Simpson's. A woman was saying, "If you have something to say about religion, then here's your chance to be on national television." "Our new show, 'A World in Transition', wants to hear what you think about the new age, the new millenium, the second coming, and the place of religion in the modern world. Ring this number now" On the screen appeared a telephone number, with a smaller notation saying "Successful

respondents must meet their own travel and accommodation costs.” In even smaller print, there appeared, “calls charged at \$1.50 per minute”.

Sri Pompous was suddenly seized with enthusiasm, and wasted no time in ringing the number and making arrangements to travel immediately to Bowling Green, Kentucky, where the show was to be produced. By a remarkable coincidence, the Church of Total Symmetry’s publicity department had arranged for Vortan the Deceptor to appear on the same show, and he and Sri Pompous were slated to discuss the topic “The relevance of organized religion in today’s world.”

When Vortan was shown into the dressing room, and saw Sri Pompous leaning back in a chair getting his face made up, and the shine taken off his bald spot, he almost turned around and walked out again. But there was no getting away, surrounded as he was by a bevy of drooling acolytes and yes-goons, in front of which he didn’t want to lose face. He nodded stiffly towards Sri Pompous, who beamed merrily, and with great delight shouted, “Vortan! What a pleasant surprise! Grand Preceptor, isn’t it? Glorious effulgence, they tell me. Well, well, well. Look at you! What fun you must be having, and what a nice bunch of chums!”

Vortan nodded again, but retained a dignified silence in front of his minions. His mind was whirling, though, figuring out how he could manage to avoid being shown up by Sri Pompous, and escape the interview without being severely embarrassed.

The presenter was a woman in her mid thirties, with the glossy look of super preserved youth and hair dried and baked as hard as a rock by constant exposure to studio lights. Her name was Geena LaFoglie, and she started off by saying “Membership in traditional Christian religions has fallen by 10% per year since 1965, according to Professor Yule Winthrop from the Pan American Christian Virtual University. Does this mean that organized religion is no longer able to meet the spiritual needs of today’s sophisticated consumer? We’re talking to Sri Pompous Q McNinney, proprietor of the very successful Guru-Wash chain of baptismal and spiritual purification franchises, and Sri Vortan the Preceptor, spiritual leader of the Church of Total Symmetry. What do you say, Sri Pompous?”

“Well,” he replied, “I believe that today’s customers of spiritual services are much more discerning than ever before, and are particularly sensitive to frauds and charlatans. And let’s face it, most of what has passed for religion in this country has been at a pretty low level of the evolutionary scale. People these days are aware of the great religions of the East, indigenous spirituality, new age miracles, yoga, and all the rest. If you can’t give them a miracle, then at least you have to give them a coherent set of practices and a framework for achieving illumination. And that’s something the traditional churches just don’t know how to provide”

“Would you call the Church of Total Symmetry a traditional Church, Sri Vortan?”

“No, I wouldn’t Geena. I have to agree completely with Sri Pompous’s point. That’s why in the Church of Total Symmetry our members follow a graded study program, during which they apply age old methods to transform the consciousness, and create the necessary conditions for self and god realization.”

“And where do these methods originate from?” asked the hostess.

“Well,” said Vortan, glancing nervously at Sri Pompous, “the methods and techniques are the inspired works of God-realized souls, passed down through the ages, to finally take form in the Church of Total Symmetry, under my guidance and direction.”

“What nonsense!” interjected Sri Pompous. “The bulk of their discourses were written by myself, and he shamelessly filched them!”

Vortan went bright red, stood up, and coughed “Preposterous!” before running from the set.

“The truth is a hard task master”, commented Sri Pompous, and Geena, quickly recovering her lost composure, said “We’ll be right back after this commercial break!”

“What the hell is going on?” demanded Geena as soon as they were off air. She was quickly joined by the show’s producer, saying “Great TV, Geena, great TV, ride it honey.” Sri Pompous stayed sitting in his chair, seemingly oblivious to the scene he had helped create. “Go get that Vortan guy back here!” snapped the producer. “Don’t let him leave the studio till we get some more of him on camera. Lock the stage door.”

“He’s in the lobby, demanding to speak to the manager” reported a lackey. “Right said the producer, get a camera down there and studio monitor, and a two way link. We’re on air in 15 seconds. Geena, talk to the Pompous guy, I’ll signal when we’ve got the other guy on camera, he’ll come up on your monitor. Give him a hard time. OK. 5 seconds.”

The producer disappeared off set, spat a few directions into a walkie-talkie, and signaled, “on air”.

“Welcome back”, said Geena. “We’re talking to Sri Pompous Q McNinney, proprietor of Guru-Wash enterprises, who has just made some shocking allegations about the Church of Total Symmetry.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” interjected Sri Pompous. “I’ve got nothing against the teachings of the Church of Total Symmetry. After all, many of them originate with myself. It’s Vortan I have a problem with. We used to call him the Deceptor back when he was part of my ashram. Now he calls himself the Preceptor of the Divine Effulgence, or some such nonsense. But I don’t mind too much, because a whole bunch of people are being exposed to my spiritual teachings, who wouldn’t necessarily be attracted to Guru-Wash Enterprises. So I guess it’s not altogether a bad thing.”

“We have Vortan, the Preceptor of the Church of Total Symmetry, on camera now. Vortan, what is your response to these allegations?”

“They are entirely baseless, Geena, and completely without foundation, as all members of the church will immediately realize. Sri Pompous may have had some spiritual stature at one stage of his life, but he has lost it all since turning his spirituality into a business enterprise like Guru-Wash. I believe that his vanity has got the better of him, and he can’t bear the thought of a former student presenting a purer and more consistent spiritual teaching, unsullied by greed and avarice, so he has to resort to these baseless allegations, which are an insult to the church members, and do nothing more than display the low level of vindictiveness to which he has sunk.”

Sri Pompous seemed highly amused by Vortan’s impassioned speech, and sat leaning back in his chair, nodding slowly, as if agreeing with every word.

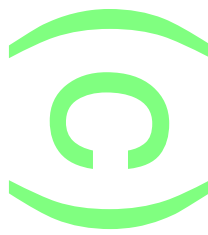
“And what is your response Sri Pompous?” asked Geena.

“Well, it doesn’t worry me one way or the other what people believe about me, Vortan, or the Church of Total Symmetry. What’s important is that people listen in the stillness of their own minds and hearts, rise above prejudices, beliefs, and their habits of mind, and try to perceive everything through the eyes of the Divine One. And when they feel that love is real, and fills their being, they’ll have no need of churches, gurus or Preceptors to tell them what’s what. They’ll be creating love, and giving it out like a waterfall of sweet light. That’s true spirituality. It’s found in the heart, not in a church, or a business transaction.”

“Sri Vortan?”

“We’ll want a full apology and a complete retraction, or we’ll be settling the matter in court!”

“And that’s where we have to leave it for today folks. All the thrills and spills of the new age, right here, in your living room. And remember, you saw it first on ‘A World in Transition’, with Geena LaFoglie. Till next time.”



The Happiness Academy

Of course Sri Pompous had no intention of making any apologies, and far from retracting his comments, he repeated them with great gusto at every available opportunity, both public and private. These opportunities came thick and fast, because the controversy had made quite a stir, and it seemed that a trail of reporters was beating a trail to his door. In the ensuing media melee, Johnson Nudibranch and his Internet site were discovered by the mainstream media, and he was instantly elevated to “independent expert on the Church of Total Symmetry, and cult de-programmer.” It wasn’t long before the Church of Total Symmetry mobilized its bevy of corporate lawyers, and soon Sri Pompous, Johnson Nudibranch, and a dozen daily newspapers found themselves embroiled in litigation. Although Sri Pompous’s cash flow from his Guru-wash business was enormous by ordinary standards, he had the franchise fees channeled into trust funds which sponsored projects for the alleviation of poverty and education and literacy throughout the world. He lived personally on a modest income that covered his meager expenses for food and clothing. He therefore elected to represent himself in his forthcoming legal confrontation with the Church of Total symmetry. Although a highly spiritual being, Sri Pompous was a very poor lawyer, and the courts found that He willfully and maliciously misrepresented the Church of Total Symmetry, and Vortan the Deceptor, causing damage to their reputation. He was therefore required to pay several million dollars in compensatory payments to Vortan personally, and to the Church of Total Symmetry. Fortunately, Sri Pompous had so structured his affairs that he had no profit stake in his vast empire. All proceeds went straight to several trust funds which were independently managed by boards of trustees. Sri Pompous’s sole tie to the organization was as Manager, for which task he received his modest salary as previously reported. So there was no way that Sri Pompous could meet the outlandish damages awarded against him. In addition, he quickly resigned from his position as manager of Guru-Wash, appointing one of the senior franchisees to take his place, thus removing the final connection between himself and the Guru-wash empire. He was entirely cast upon the generosity of a small cadre of spiritual students, who allowed him to sleep on their lounges, taking it in turns, a week each.

So much to Vortan’s dismay, he found that the millions of dollars flowing through the immensely successful Guru-Wash incorporated remained outside of his grasp. Far from being millions richer for having won his lawsuit, he found himself substantially poorer, through having clocked up vast legal fees, due to his habit of hiring only the best, most expensive legal counsel.

Vortan’s only satisfaction was that Sri Pompous was forced to declare himself bankrupt. His only debt was the millions owed to Vortan and the Church of Total Symmetry. And his only assets were \$357.35, held in his bank account, a tennis racquet (valued at \$47), and the computer that he used for writing. All these assets were duely turned over to Vortan and the church, in discharge of Sri Pompous’s debt. And Sri Pompous found himself owning nothing in the world, but the clothes on his back, some fresh underwear, and a suitcase filled with miscellaneous items of clothing and a few personal effects.

Far from feeling saddened or dismayed by this turn of events, Sri Pompous felt more light hearted than he had for ages. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He walked with a spring in his step, and was often heard to be whistling merrily. He wasted no time in once again setting up small teaching sessions, by donation, and due to the publicity of the court case, there was no shortage of students. Due to his status as bankrupt, Sri Pompous was prevented from operating a business, so Johnson Nudibranch, who had become quite close to Sri Pompous during the lawsuits, ran the business side of things. Soon they were able to rent a small studio apartment for Sri Pompous, and provide a small allowance for food and expenses, and the remaining donations were placed in a trust fund, whose charter was to further the propagation of truth and spiritual illumination of the masses. For legal reasons, the resulting venture was called the Johnson Nudibranch School of Personal transformation and Academy of Happiness. And so that there could be no question of Sri Pompous being in control of things, classes and consultations were taken by senior students of Sri Pompous.

To save themselves time in developing course materials, Sri Pompous decided to use the discourses published by the Church of Total Symmetry, a complete set of which was in the possession of Johnson Nudibranch, due, you will remember, to his activities in tracing the original authorship of these discourses. They removed the Church of Total Symmetry letter head, and where the discourses were written by Sri Pompous, simply put them on new letter head for the “Johnson Nudibranch school of personal transformation and Academy of Happiness.” Where the discourses were originally written by others, some explanatory notes were added, original sources were noted, and once permission from the copyright holders had been obtained, the discourses were added to the curriculum. The later discourses, which Vortan had had written, were judged to be devoid of significant spiritual content, and were relegated to the scrap heap.

Once the Academy started picking up steam, a remarkable thing began to take place. Many Church of Total Symmetry members who had been disgruntled by the plagiarism issue, resigned their church membership, and enrolled in courses at the academy. Many others who had grown concerned by the dumbing down of the discourses, a result of Vortan’s wave of evangelistic enthusiasm, heard about the academy, and were thrilled to be able to continue their study of the material which had so inspired and uplifted them. In the course of these studies, they, naturally, were confronted with the original sources of many of their treasured church discourses, purified of the subtle (and not so subtle!) messages of guilt, manipulation and undermining of self confidence that Vortan had used to tie people to the Church. For legal reasons, the academy made no mention at all of the Church of Total Symmetry, yet the very fact of seeing the original sources of the teachings in black and white, served to precipitate a final crisis of separation in many members. The bulk of them ended up canceling their church membership, and in the process became, happier more well balanced individuals.

As well as the flood of converts from the Church of Total Symmetry there was also an influx of new seekers after the knowledge of self-transformation. Before long, the Academy was in a sound financial position, and had purchased a rural retreat space for the use of students and the conduct of teaching seminars and workshops, away from the hustle and the bustle of the city.

As the academy went from success to success, the Church of Total Symmetry began to feel the pinch. Vortan’s lavish lifestyle and extravagant habits, in combination with a steady decline in membership, soon resulted in financial strictures. Rather than making any sacrifices to his grandiose lifestyle, however, Vortan ordered that cuts of twenty percent be applied to the salaries of all Church workers.

Tenille’s Story,

compiled from her Diary’s and Editor’s interviews.

I was a young impressionable woman, still a teenager, when I came across the teachings of the Church of Total Symmetry. Even though the name was really goofy sounding, I was struck by something about the church writings. They had a kind of luminous quality to them, and they made my heart leap within me. I seemed to be suffused by a kind of wondrous joy when those books were open, and they seemed to be reminding me of things I already knew deep within me, but had forgotten how to put into words. The impression on me was very deep. I was naturally a very cautious person, but in this case, I threw caution to the winds, and threw myself into the study of the church writings and dedicated myself to spending one hour per day, morning and evening, going through the suggested practices.

After a few weeks, I began to see the image of Vortan the Deceptor very clearly in my mind’s eye. I had photographs of him in my bedroom, my kitchen, and my living room. Even behind the toilet door, I had his picture framed, to remind me to contemplate his radiant form during my ablutions! I was very sincere in my practices and very sincere in my desire to become Self and God realized. And many changes and spiritual experiences began to take place within the crucible of my life. Before every decision, I used to ask the radiant Vortan consciousness within me for direction, and if I followed the proffered advice, then all went

well. Soon I became very boring and uninteresting to my previous friends and family, who decided I'd gone all spiritual, and didn't want anything to do with me any more. Maybe it was because I never stopped talking about Vortan the Deceptor, and the Church of Total Symmetry. I guess I'd submersed myself in it to such a degree that I forgot how weird it all sounded to ordinary ears.

I met a young man who was also passionate about the Church, and we had a whirl wind romance and married. I simply asked the radiant form of Vortan within me whether we were supposed to get married, and he answered in the affirmative. So we married after knowing each other for only three weeks. My family thought I was completely stupid, but it was a terribly exciting adventure. We were both young, and living our lives and every experience according to the wisdom from the radiant presence.

There was a vibrant local chapter of the Church, and we went three times per week to various functions. Radiance was my favorite experience. Every Wednesday, we would gather in front of a large photo of the Deceptor, and chant Vor-tan for sometimes up to three hours. The ineffable radiance would then shine in our hearts, transmitted from his own perfected being to ours, and speeding us on our way to enlightenment. These sessions were very popular, because they had the effect of burning away excess karma. We used the metaphor of bathing in the Deceptor's holy radiance, which washed the dross of the Soul. Afterwards we would be high as kites, and believed that we had been cleansed to a deep level of our beings.

Everyone in our local chapter was passionate about the Church, and believed that it was the spiritual path par excellence. We had all had various spiritual experiences with the radiant Deceptor, and our lives were changing, and we were becoming conduits for the ineffable effulgence.

Unfortunately my marriage didn't last. After about six months, I discovered that my husband had been sleeping with one of the other church members behind my back. When I confronted him about it, he admitted it, and when I consulted the radiance within, the advice was separation and divorce. So I gave him his marching orders. Unfortunately, by this time I was four months pregnant. Then followed a very difficult time for me. I was too proud to crawl back to my family. I don't think I could have stood their crowing and I told you so. Fortunately, a couple of Church members, older woman, took me in to live with them and supported me through my pregnancy. It was almost too much for me when my Son was stillborn. I felt that somehow it was my fault, and became very depressed, letting my practices slip away. I couldn't work, and was forced to live on a disability pension, which added to my feelings of guilt. The Church, of course, teaches that we should all be able to stand on our own two feet. But then I had a dream in which Vortan came to me and said, "You really need that pension now. It's good karma from a previous life. Just accept it as the gift of Spirit."

This dream was a turning point for me. My guilt feelings began to disappear, and I realized that I shouldn't accept the written teachings of the Church verbatim in all situations. I realized that every situation is different. I learned that the inner wisdom, and the personal inner teachings of the radiant Preceptor, are of greater importance than the written works. Of course, Vortan had been saying this all along in various writings and discourses, but I had chosen to ignore it.

From here on, I had earned myself a new maturity of outlook, and paid more credence to the inner wisdom than the external preachings. And this was as it should be, and in accordance with Vortan's great plan for every soul to reach a state of ultimate enlightenment. Several more years went by, and then one day, I had another dream audience with Vortan. "It is time," he said, "to link directly with your own effulgent radiance. It is no longer necessary for my form to be an intermediary between you and the ultimate. You must discard all my photographs, and from now on invoke your own effulgent radiance. In fact, be, your own effulgent radiance."

I was very disturbed by this dream. At first I thought that it was a trick from the dark forces of Satan, designed to snare me in a destructive action that could only have terrible consequences for my Spiritual growth. But then I realized how attached I had become to the form of Vortan within me, and how dependent I was on it. It was like I was expected to kill my very best friend in all the world. Naturally, I could not bring myself to take this drastic action. But now, whenever I sought guidance from the inner radiant form of Vortan, he remained stubbornly silent. This went on for several months, and I was in quite a state.

Suddenly, I broke out into a great feeling of rage that Vortan was now deserting me, and buoyed by this feeling of anger, I removed all his pictures and burnt them. As the last one disappeared into ash, I felt a great lightness come over my being. I heard his voice saying "Be the Radiance...", and I felt as if suddenly my energy bodies were plugged into a higher voltage outlet. I began to weep uncontrollably, and at the same time a great sweetness and light was poring through me. Presently, I became used to it. The radiance no longer speaks to me in words I can understand with the mind. But I put my attention on it, and I know exactly what I need to do in any situation. No one can understand the sweetness and empowering nature of this experience who has not had it.

After this, it seemed that I could see everything in my life so much more clearly, it was almost frightening. I imagined that I was an enlightened being, and had a message of vast spiritual importance for the world. And that message was join the Church of Total Symmetry now! Look how it has changed me from a bumbling teenager into an enlightened being. It can do the same for you as well! By this time I was in my late twenties, and had been in the Church of Total Symmetry for just on ten years. I was chosen to be the chapter leader in my local area, and launched into the responsibility with great gusto. I organized talks and meetings and discussion groups, and at the end of every month, sent in a list of new members that had been signed up to head-quarters.

During all this time, I had never met personally Vortan the Deceptor. I had only held his radiant image in my heart, and drunk the sweet wisdom from his inner voice. You can imagine my excitement when I was chosen for a personal audience with Vortan, in recognition of the great work that was being done in my area. I was very flustered and excited for the three weeks prior to the meeting. I hopped a plane to headquarters in Las Vegas, and caught a cab to my hotel. I was booked in the day before, because I wanted to get a good night's sleep, so I was fresh and ready for the meeting. However, I didn't sleep a wink. The whole night, a great current of spiritual ecstasy played through my being, imbuing me with the sweet nectar of Divine love, as I lay on my bed. My whole being was pulsing with the current, and I opened myself to it, allowing it to flow through me, purifying negative karma, and emanating out into the world to do its quiet work of healing and uplifting all. I felt so lucky, so honored, to have been chosen for this experience, and I kept thanking God for the chance to follow the teachings of the Church of Total Symmetry, and now for this opportunity to meet the Deceptor himself. I figured that the experience was due to the proximity of the great channel of the Deceptor's physical vehicle, and also a need to purify and uplift my consciousness before the meeting.

So the next morning, even though I had not slept a wink, I was fresh and bright. I caught a cab to the office for my appointment, but Vortan was out. His secretary was a lovely woman, although she looked over worked. She had the light of spirit shining strongly within her eyes. "Vortan doesn't usually come into the office these days", she said, "unless it's a special occasion."

"I have an appointment", I said, perhaps smiling a little too radiantly.

Just then the outside door opened, and I felt a rush of air. My heart skipped a beat, because I knew that my spiritual guide for all these years had stepped into the room.

"Has that bloody woman showed up yet?" asked a voice which I knew instantly to be Vortan the Deceptor's.

"Yes she has," said the secretary.

"Damn it", said Vortan, "Quigley's in the car waiting, and we're off for a game of golf. Just fob her off will you. I'll be back this afternoon and I can see her then if she's still around."

Then the door banged, and he was gone. I felt myself being completely deflated.

"Why don't you come back at four?" suggested the receptionist.

"Right", I said, and slunk out the door feeling about two inches tall. I walked quickly down the street, past the gambling establishments and diners and cheap motels. My mind was a whir, and my heart was beating

like an over-wrought punching bag. Could this be the great spiritual leader that I had come all this way to see? How could he treat me with such disdain? Was he always this way to others, or was it just me? Currents of anger, embarrassment and dark depression washed over me in successive waves, as I stalked mindlessly through the streets, unconscious of my surroundings, and sinking into a deep despair. Suddenly I came back to reality. A boy, a teenager, ran past me, and grabbed my bag from my hands, almost pushing me over in the process. The bag contained the cash for my trip away, and all my ID and credit cards. "Hey!", I yelled, "Stop!", but it was too late, the boy had disappeared into the crowd. I was stunned and I simply stood there in the street in a state of wooly non-comprehension. It just all seemed far too much. Then I heard a voice next to me. A middle-aged man was saying, "Are you all right? I saw what happened. Can I give you a lift somewhere?" In my shock I forgot to consult with my inner radiance, and out of stupid relief, I accepted his kind offer, and asked him to take me to my hotel. However, once I was in the car, he drove out of town. By the time I realized that something was wrong, we were driving along a deserted back road. I won't go into the lurid details. The fact is that he raped me, and left me out in the desert, to die for all he knew or cared.

You can imagine what sort of state I was in. It was hot. I was sore. I had been bashed. My mouth was parched, and I felt that my entire world had shattered into a million pieces, and that the only thing left for me to do was crawl under a rock and die. However, I forced myself to walk back towards the city. I tried to flag down passing cars, but no one stopped. I guess I must have looked like a crazed lunatic, disheveled, dirty, bruised and wild-eyed. Someone must have reported me to the police though, because after about half an hour, a police car came along, and pulled up next to me. A young African American officer wound down his window, and said, "Are you in some kind of trouble, Ma'am?"

I could say nothing, I looked at him for half a second, and started sobbing and crying. Eventually, I managed to get my story out, and they drove me back to the police station, and I gave them a description of both my assailants. Then they drove me to my hotel, advising me to cancel my credit cards. Which I did, and then I ran a bath, and climbed into it. I didn't want to call any one. I was estranged from my family. I knew what my friends in the Church would say. It was my karma. Be detached from it. That was the last thing I wanted to hear. It was playing over in my mind. Not the rape, but the trauma of having to tell my friends what had happened. And them saying, it's just your karma. Try and be detached. It's the will of the ineffable effulgence. I resolved that I would tell no one. I would pretend that absolutely nothing had happened. When I got out of the bath, It was 5:00pm. I had missed my appointment with Vortan the Deceptor. However it didn't seem important anymore.

The next morning I went to the bank, and made arrangements to have some money transferred to me. I checked out of the hotel, and took a flight back home. A few days later, an official letter from the Church arrived. I was being removed from my position as local coordinator of the Church's activities. The reason they gave was my failure to keep a key appointment with Vortan the Deceptor, during which future plans for the area were to be discussed. Since a key tenet of the church was accountability, and since I had failed to notify them either before or after the appointment I had missed, I was hereby removed from my duties as area coordinator. I read the letter again, and again, but the message was always the same. We must regrettably remove you from your duties as area coordinator.

For a time I was stunned. I sat, with the letter in my hand, reading it over and over. I felt like the last remaining solid piece of my life was being removed, and that I was being left with nothing. After all my hard work, after all my efforts for the Church, here they were wiping me without so much as a please explain. What made it particularly galling was that, of course, I had not missed the appointment at all! It was Vortan the Deceptor who had missed the appointment, going off for his game of golf. I was angry. I was bitter. I was humiliated. I felt righteously aggrieved. I fantasized all types of revenge on the organization, and Vortan the Deceptor himself. I started rumors amongst the Church members that I was removed because I was having a secret affair with Vortan that had gone sour. However it backfired. No one would believe that Vortan would do such a thing, and it was dismissed as sour grapes on my part. I began to talk to the press, and made up all types of scandalous and salacious gossip about Vortan and the workings of the church. Several local papers happily printed these stories, however, no member of the church would believe any of it. And then it was begun to be put about that I was unstable, and had a history of mental disturbances. None of my former Church friends would have anything to do with me. Having no other

friends, and still estranged from my family, it's no surprise I suffered a nervous breakdown. I attempted suicide, and was admitted to the local mental asylum. This was actually the best thing that could have happened to me. The doctors discerned, quite rightly, that I was not insane, but in need of counseling and support. They gave me medication. I was instructed to write a diary. I talked to a counselor each day. I told my story, and I began to feel less bad about myself, and with help, I began to map out a plan for getting my life back together.

I realized that this series of experiences had been teaching me a very valuable lesson. I had considered myself enlightened. And yet when the crunch came, I indulged in every kind of anger, bitterness, vengeful behavior, and self centered negativity. It was nothing but arrogance and pride that had led me to believe myself enlightened, and this was borne out by my reaction to those traumatic events. I soon began to see that Vortan the Deceptor had refused to see me because of my spiritual arrogance. As a fully enlightened being himself, he would have seen straight away the condition of my soul, and so immediately devised this method of showing me that there is no place for pride and arrogance on the Spiritual path. The rape and robbery then symbolized how my own negativity was robbing me of my spiritual riches, and violating the purity of my inner Soul. Subjected to the powerful spiritual vortex that accompanies the person of the Deceptor, my negativity rebounded at me in this extreme form. And then, in my subsequent unbalanced state, not taking responsibility for what I had brought upon myself, I was no longer a fit channel for the work of the Church. I had to be removed, once again a fitting demonstration that pride and arrogance have no place on the Spiritual path.

So within myself I began to thank the radiant effulgence for giving me the gift of these experiences, and so allowing me to recognize the pitfalls of spiritual pride and arrogance, and the destructive effect of my own negativity. Each morning, I thanked the radiant effulgence for its lessons, and committed myself to being its pure channel. As the days passed, I began to regain my poise and balance, the black moods passed away, and they began to reduce my medication, until I was allowed to return to the outside world. I resumed a low-key role within the Church, looking after the library books. I was perfectly happy to serve my fellows in this small way. I noted however, that something within me had changed. A great sweetness would visit itself upon me. I was prone to reveries. I would catch the sound of a birdsong, or a chirping cricket, and feel a great sense of joy. I would suspend what I was doing, and just listen, and it was like my heart would open up into the sound, and I felt such love for God's creatures, and thanked them for their beautiful voices that gave me so much delight. The breeze would rustle in the leaves outside my window, and the sound would capture me. It was like the spirit of the wind had come to whisper secrets in my ear, secrets of God's beautiful and sublime love for all of life. Many people came for library books. Some stayed to chat.

People began to tell me their problems, and their ailments. I could see the negativity that clung to them, like a tight sheet. A few people seemed to have a light shining in their hearts. These I would gaze at, lovingly, and they would gaze back at me, and it was like drinking the nectar of the cup of Spirit. However these were few, even within the Church membership. However, I didn't judge people, or even care about the state of their aura. I was only interested in doing my little bit of service as best I could, and in keeping myself free of all negativity, by filling myself with love for all of creation. Then people began saying that they had been healed by me. That I had come to them in their dreams, or in their meditations, and given them much needed advice, or cured their medical or emotional problems. From my point of view, it was all news to me. I gently tried to dissuade people from these views. But I soon realized that such gentle dissuasion only caused people to more firmly insist on my miraculous intervention. I felt that such situations ran the risk of re-igniting my spiritual pride and arrogance. So each time someone said something along these lines, I thanked God for helping them, and prayed that they might grow to know God directly in their own hearts.

Soon it became very difficult for me to keep working in the library. There were just too many people always crowding around. Not wanting to borrow books. They just wanted to talk to me, and ask me to pray for them. I always told them the same thing. I will pray for you to find your own connection to God, to say your own prayers, and to trust in God's love for you. And I recommend to you the teachings of the Church of Total Symmetry as the best way to do it.

I must have presented somewhat of a problem for the church officials, being such a draw card, and being so popular and all, and yet having no part in the church hierarchy, officially still persona non-gratis. However

because of my constantly recommending the Church, membership was really soaring, and so I guess they thought that on the whole I was good for membership.

I guess it was inevitable that the folks at head-quarters, perhaps even Vortan himself, would get to hear of these healings and spiritual phenomena that were manifesting around me. However, far from being delighted that the teachings of the Church had been so successful in producing in me a channel for Spirit's healing and transformative energies, appeared disturbed and unsettled, and even, dare I say it, threatened. Letter's came from headquarters that were to be read at all the local services. In these, Vortan stated that those who flamboyantly demonstrate miraculous healing abilities or other miraculous powers are at a low stage of Spiritual evolution. "They lack", the letters said, "the wisdom of discrimination, through which it is clear to more highly developed souls the great injustice that is done to a person by healing them of their illnesses, which are none other than Karmic lessons, the fruit of their own actions. Those who indulge in so-called spiritual healing, are spiritual thieves, robbing souls of their chance to learn their lessons, and so preventing them from reaching enlightenment in this lifetime. Such a spiritual transgression is of the most serious order, and the karma bounces back on the person who does the healing. Church members are therefore instructed that only centrally authorized healings are to be carried out. Those carrying out healings on church premises must desist immediately." And so on in that vein.

At first I was deeply shocked by these missives from headquarters. I knew that the healings that people claimed through my agency were simply the work of Divine Spirit. Furthermore, there was no way that I could stop them, even if I wanted to. It was something quite beyond the volition of my everyday self. So I carried on my simple task in the library. After such a letter was read, I would get a few days, perhaps a week, of peace and quiet. Then people would start building up again. However, there was not so much talk anymore. People stopped telling me that I healed them, or visited them in their dreams. They just came by, and nodded or winked at me, sometimes making a little stage bow in my direction, and almost always slipping a donation into the donation box.

After several months, I received a visit from two suited gentlemen from headquarters in Vegas. I soon discovered that they were lawyers, retained by the Church leadership. Their mission was to present me with a court order preventing me from discussing the Church of Total Symmetry with any person, preventing me from being on Church Property, and preventing me from conducting unauthorized spiritual healings with church members. I was to be escorted from the premises. I was persona-non-gratis, and my Church membership was cancelled immediately and permanently. The reason for these stringent measures was my spiritual disobedience.

You would be excused for thinking that I was upset, angry, confused, or just unhappy by this strange circumstance. But in fact I was none of these things. It seemed so incredible, that I laughed out loud. In an instant, I saw that the Church leadership was spiritually and morally bankrupt, and my removal was simply so that they wouldn't be threatened by someone who could demonstrate genuine spiritual achievement. To say it straight out like that must seem somewhat egotistical, but there was nothing of ego in that moment of realization. I suddenly felt a great sense of freedom and joy as I realized that I don't need this Church, with its morally and spiritually bankrupt leader. It was with a sense of calm, poise, and even excitement that I gathered together my few personal belongings, and left behind the center, as I thought, never to return.

As I walked along the street, I could feel the breeze softly blowing in my hair, and I felt so much love for the breeze, and the air that we breathe. I could hear the leaves gently rustling, and some birds singing. I felt like I was starting a whole new life, completely new and fresh, and I felt great. It seemed that the Church of Total Symmetry was a constricting garment, several sizes too small, and now that I had discarded it, I could flex my muscles, and luxuriate in my true nature.

However, after several days, this euphoria left me, and I began to realize that I needed companionship, as well as an income. I was able to get some work waitressing at a local diner. The pay wasn't great, and the customers were often tired, dirty, and rude, but I seemed to enjoy it, none-the-less. As I took each order, and served each meal, it was my earnest wish that each customer be nourished deep within their soul, and find within themselves the inner peace and happiness I could see so many obviously lacked. Soon I was making more than twice the tips of any of the other waitresses. After a week or two, I noticed that members

of the Church had begun to eat at the diner. The number and frequency of their visits steadily increased, and though nothing was said, they often winked, or nodded their heads at me. After several more weeks, their numbers had increased to such a degree, that a line formed outside the diner, with people waiting up to two hours for a chance to order and consume a meal.

I made a lot of money. People tipped very generously. The owner of the diner was puzzled, but delighted at the extra business. He didn't mention anything, and neither did I. Things went on like this for several months. I was happy in my job. Each moment I dedicated myself to the Holy Spirit. I heard rumors about the remarkable healings that were taking place. But I paid no heed. It was Spirit's affair, and I was just happy to be the vehicle for this phenomenon. Then, I was paid a visit by a man that I vaguely recognized from the Church of Total Symmetry. He introduced himself as Johnson Nudibranch, and my impression was of a sincere, if somewhat serious, man. He asked if we could meet to discuss something of mutual interest, and we arranged to meet for coffee after my shift.

The place we had arranged for the meeting was a funky little café down the road from the diner. It was called the Horse's Head Café, and was decorated in op shop chic. The floorboards were bare, there were some interesting 50s lamp shades, some internet booths, and wooden tables and chairs, plenty of scratches. They sometimes had a jazz band playing in the corner, but today it was quiet. When I walked in, I saw Johnson straight away, and joined him at the table. He ordered a coffee, and I ordered a peppermint tea, and we exchanged a bit of small talk.

"We have a mutual interest in the Church of Total Symmetry", he said, as if by way of explanation. I laughed when he said this.

"Did have, you mean", I laughed. "I am persona non grata. They've got a court order preventing me from having anything to do with them now." Now it was his turn to laugh.

"Well, at least we have that in common!", he replied. "They've slapped me with a court order preventing me from distributing my book about them". He reached into his leather attaché, and produced a fat volume. "It documents the true source of much of the Church's discourses and publications, the original publications that Vortan copied."

I laughed again. "Well, that explains it then", I said, "How a shmuck like Vortan the Deceptor can manage to write such spiritually relevant and inspirational stuff." I felt like I had the last piece of the jig saw. I had thought that Vortan was originally a spiritual giant, who had become corrupted by power and ego, and so fallen away from the path of true spirituality. But here was a much simpler, more satisfying answer. He had always been a sham.

"There is a group of us dedicated to exposing the duplicity of the church, and publicly exposing Vortan's fraudulent claims to spiritual mastership. With your influence amongst the church members, it would be a major blow for him if you came out publicly with his duplicity."

It wasn't something I felt like I could give a decision about straight away. I wanted to know more about exactly what Johnson and his cohorts were trying to achieve.

"Our aim is expose the duplicity at the foundation of the Church of Total Symmetry, with the aim of freeing Church Members from the clutches of a dishonest and amoral organization. Our aim is to expose Vortan the Deceptor as a fraud, and to encourage the Church Members to deal with its duplicitous leader, revise its materials quoting original sources, and conduct itself openly and honestly."

I could see that he was passionate about his aims, and had the aspect and demeanor of the moral crusader.

"It is the principal of the thing - the importance of truth and honesty at the foundation of a spiritual teaching. How can something of lasting worth and benefit be built on a foundation of lies and duplicity? The way the church is set up it's just a fraud for satisfying Vortan's ego, and making him a bucket load of money."

And yet in my time with the Church of Total Symmetry, a time during which I had diligently and sincerely followed its teachings, I had seemed to develop into some kind of channel for miraculous healings, and had developed a poise and sweet equanimity which supported me and gave me incredible joy and satisfaction. It's true, I had come to the conclusion that the church leadership was morally bankrupt and spiritually barren. But the teachings themselves had been extraordinarily effective in my life. And I realized that a key part of the teaching's power had been my complete faith and total trust in the person of Vortan the Deceptor! This was the key that had allowed me to develop an open communication with my own inner radiance. So for this reason, I was not immediately sympathetic to Johnson's aims. I realized to expose and reform the church in the way he suggested would largely nullify its ability to work the transformation I had undergone in the lives of others. And I also realized that what I wanted above all else was to help people to achieve the same wonderful gift that I had been blessed with. I tried to explain these things to Johnson, but he just couldn't see my point, and insisted that the longer it went on, the more people would be hurt, and the more people would end up feeling angry and betrayed, used and abused by Vortan and his lieutenants. I could see the truth in what he was saying, but felt that there must be another way to bring things to a resolution, though, I couldn't see what it was.

So we parted, agreeing to keep in contact, and apparently respecting each other's positions, though I could see that Johnson was clearly disappointed, and couldn't understand how I didn't see things his way.

So things went on much as they had been. Every now and again I would pick up a bit of gossip about the doings of Vortan, or the Church. Mostly I found out about things through chatting with church members who came to the cafe for meals. And as time went by, I became more convinced of what had to happen, but not at all sure of what my role should be, or how I myself should become involved. I became convinced that the church needed new leadership. A fundamental changing of the guard. They needed a new leader who was genuinely spiritual, who had followed the church teachings, and in who they had taken root and worked their transformation. Such a leader, I felt, could halt the damaging excesses of Vortan's leadership style, and many of the disgruntled members would return to the fold, accompanied by many new seekers attracted by genuine opportunities for spiritual advancement. Needless to say, I began to think that perhaps this person could be myself. For a time I resisted the notion, believing myself to be caught in an ego delusion, yet another obstacle in my journey towards the ultimate union. But then I realized that it was just as much an ego delusion to believe myself unworthy of such a task. I began to believe that circumstances had been preparing me for just such an undertaking as this, and that it was even the Divine Will. But of course Vortan was not about to hand the church leadership over, just like that. And I was at a complete loss as to how such an event might come about. I had not the slightest idea how any action of mine could even remotely influence Vortan in this direction. I knew that he was far too happy enjoying flying off to the Caribbean with successions of star-struck young female devotees, not to mention enjoying almost unlimited wealth. So I just bided my time, knowing that if I was fated to pick up the mantle of the Church, then it would have to be through some miraculous intervention.

Maybe a year went by. I heard that Vortan had been putting on weight, and was being prescribed anti-depressants by a bevy of young doctors that he had hired. On his few public appearances, he didn't speak much, but he puffed a lot when he walked, and was always mopping at his head with a handkerchief. Gossip was running rife that he had been to the Betty Ford clinic for an alcohol problem. More and more he left the running of the church to his lieutenants, who spent more and more of their time covering up for him, buying off the young devotees that he had used, and figuring out how to squeeze more money out of the church membership. It was at this time that Vortan disappeared, and his wife became the official spokesperson for the Church. At first, she simply read out letters from Vortan, or so she said, and so most believed. It was said that Vortan had retired from the world for a time, to go into retreat, and renew his spiritual explorations. But one of the visitors to the cafe had it on good authority that he was lying semi comatose in a private hospital. Whether he had some kind of stroke, or whether he was being kept under deliberate sedation, I didn't dare to guess. After several months, once Vortan's wife had become familiar and accepted, she made the following announcement.

"Sri Vortan has announced that it is time for another to take the reins of the Church of Total Symmetry. His mission to introduce the most advanced spiritual teaching ever to be revealed on this Earth planet has been

a resounding success. It will be another's mission to bring the Church of Total Symmetry to its next stage of unfoldment, where it is destined to be a significant force in the spiritual life of the planet. Sri Vortan looks forward to the day when a large proportion of the world's population will be devotees of the Church of Total Symmetry, finding the spiritual peace and fulfillment that only the Church of Total Symmetry can bring about. And those people who are not devotees will have been touched in some way by its teachings. Sri Vortan from now on will only be available for spiritual guidance to those who have developed themselves sufficiently to be able to meet him on the third ethereal plane, where he is currently putting the finishing touches to an ethereal temple of instruction, to be made available to all members of the Church who diligently perform their spiritual exercises. A further announcement will be made when the new preceptor has been chosen."

Now I could instantly recognize this for the hogwash that it was, but the bulk of the devotees took it at face value, and soon reports began to flood in of meetings with Vortan in the magnificent temple on the third ethereal plane. I heard the temple described as oriental, Greek, like a modern shopping mall, Russian orthodox, and as Tolkienesque. This didn't seem to matter, and only served to make Vortan seem all the more powerful, in that his construction could take on such disparate forms to different people. It didn't seem to occur to anyone that each was creating a temple according to a design of his or her own subconscious imagination.

And then I was absolutely flabbergasted when I saw Vortan's wife at the diner. She ordered a coffee, and indicated that she wanted to talk to me in private, so we arranged to meet after my shift, in another cafe down the road, where I seldom went, but where I heard they served a good selection of herbal teas.

When I arrived, she was already sitting at a corner booth. I sat down, and we ordered a pot of peppermint tea, and we exchanged a little bit of small talk. She began by asking me if I had ever met Sri Vortan. "No," I replied. "I almost met him once, and I count it one of my greatest blessings that I never did."

"Oh really?", she replied.

"I had an appointment with him, but he blew me off to play a game of golf. To cut a long story short, I realized that he is a total sham."

"Well, that's good," she said. "We have a basis of understanding then! Our problem is that the devotees all dote on his every word, and have made him into a Saint. The truth is that he has cynically used the Church of Total Symmetry to provide himself with a luxurious lifestyle, and a stream of young star struck nymphets to satisfy his carnal passions. Now there are a few of us in the church leadership who were willing to tolerate his shortcomings for the greater good. But one has to draw the line somewhere, and, well, when he started putting on weight and exhibiting public drunkenness, well we had to do something, in order to safeguard the teachings, you understand."

"Hence the story of his retirement," I said. "But I am sure he wouldn't have done that voluntarily. Did he suffer a stroke or something?"

The woman looked a little embarrassed. "We don't need to go into the details," she said, "but he is heavily medicated, and incapable of fulfilling any engagements." She made a little coughing noise, and looked away.

"I see," I said, "And what does all this have to do with me?"

"Well", she replied, "We need a new figurehead for the church. There's enough of us who really believe in the teachings to get rid of Vortan's more self-serving lackeys. And with the right person taking up the mantle of leadership, the church could be transformed into what it should have been all along, a true spiritual teaching, led by someone of genuine spiritual stature."

"And why are you telling me this? I haven't, as I'm sure you know, been a member of the Church of Total Symmetry for several years."

"But you are well known among the membership, and people seek you out. All sorts of rumors abound about how just being in your presence cures people of everything from piles to tuberculosis. You would be a very popular choice. Plus we feel convinced that you wouldn't be corrupted by the system that Vortan has established to serve his own ends."

My heart was leaping within me, and I could feel a heat beginning in the pit of my belly that was burning like a flame. I could see the auras of everyone in the cafe very clearly, and there was a rushing sound in my ears, like the roaring of the sea in a very large seashell. I knew that I would take up this invitation, that this was the moment that I had been preparing for all my life. But there was a warning bell ringing as well, deep inside of me, sounding a cautionary note. But, in the excitement of my enthusiasm, and the sense of destiny, I pushed that small voice aside.

"We have prepared a contract," said the woman. "Here, take it and look it over. As soon as you sign up, you can begin your mastership."

The contract was a lot of legalese, including agreements of confidentiality by both parties about the contract and its terms. It also made it clear that I could be given the sack at a moments notice, by the board of governors.

"You know what lawyers are like", said the woman. "They don't trust anybody." For all practical purposes you'll be running the show. But if you start feathering your own nest, or going off the deep end, then we want to be able to get rid of you quickly and painlessly. That's the best for the church members, we believe. Not these long drawn out sagas where nobody knows what's what. Take the contract home and look it over. Get a lawyer to read it if it makes you feel better. It's a big decision, so no-one expects an immediate answer. But do let us know your decision by Friday, hey?"

Today was Wednesday. So I said, "I will let you know." I stood up, and slipping the contract back into its buff envelope, left the cafe, and walked towards my apartment, in a stunned daze.

So I became the spiritual leader of the Church of Total Symmetry. An announcement was made. The membership reacted very positively. I made some public appearances which were well received. I decided that I would make "Spiritual Food" a theme of my leadership, and with the approval of the board, a cafeteria was set up in the basement of the church headquarters. And there I waited on the tables every afternoon for a few hours. Word got around, and the cafeteria soon did a roaring business. However all tips were donated to a fund I set up for doing charitable works. The board members watched me very closely, and I soon became very busy not only with revising and re-writing the church's study materials, but with over seeing the church's finances as well. During this time I slept, on average about three or four hours per night, but felt incredibly healthy and on the ball. The Divine current was surging through me day and night, and I was as happy, or happier than I had ever been in my life. I felt that at last I was fulfilling the purpose that had been set out for me. But then I began to notice little things that gave me cause for thought. Firstly, it was very difficult to have an open and honest conversation with anyone. Now that I was a Spiritual Authority, people around me were always on their best behavior, and careful to not say anything that could remotely be considered offensive. There were those who tried to hide themselves whenever I was around, shrinking away so as to avoid drawing any attention to themselves. And there were those who made a point of saying "Notice Me" in a dozen different subtle ways. Everyone wanted a positive stroke from the Preceptor. And I noticed that if several of the board members had a disagreement, they would argue fiercely amongst themselves, if they thought that I wasn't present, but as soon as I was called in to mediate, they would be the perfect facsimiles of sweetness and light.

This worried me a little. I began to suspect that this was a basic problem with the hierarchical structure, where one person is invested with authority and power over others. Communication from heart to heart seemed impossible, except with those who gave no credence to the authority and it's supposed power. And unfortunately, as far as I could see, all the members of the Church were members, because they had invested the Church, and it's leader, with Authority and Power. Vortan had used this to his own advantage. It was my original hope that I would be able to use this for the advantage of the members, to assist them

with their spiritual growth. But I began to see that they all liked to be part of a hierarchical structure, because it made it easy to know how to treat people. The Church leadership, were all 7th degree, or higher. New seekers were always first degree. There was an established pecking order according to the degree ranking, and when church members met, they spent a lot of time indirectly maneuvering to find out the degree of the other, so that they could treat them appropriately. This was because it was considered very bad form to ask outright the degree of a church member. Our philosophy is that everyone should be treated on their own merits. Yet I could see that the degree system determined in large part how people interacted with each other.

So I decided that I would have to make some changes. The degrees would need to be abolished. However I didn't allow for the fact that the Church board had become so attached to the idea of these degrees. They were all very used to the adulation given them because of their ranking, though of course this was not their reason for resisting my plans. The devotees needed an ordered series of goals to strive for, they said. They needed to feel a sense of graduated achievement, a reward for their efforts. They closed ranks, and started waving contracts at me, so I let the matter drop. But it was clear who was wearing the pants.

Then I began to notice a certain anomaly in the accounts. Each month, a substantial bill was received from the Happy Valley health farm, an establishment in the hills a few hours from the city. When I queried this with the treasurer, he said that he would look into it, but then I heard no more about it. He kept promising to address it, but never seemed to get around to it. So I sacked him, and appointed a new treasurer, who promptly informed me that the Happy Valley health farm was an establishment that had been set up by the Church, and was now an independent organization contracted to provide specialized services. However there was no record of any services at all, specialized or not, ever having been received. So I resolved to go and take a look at the establishment, and have a little chat with the manager. In the back of my mind was the question of my predecessor. No-one, in all this time, had even mentioned Vortan, and I had been so busy that I had barely thought of him at all. Now I began to wonder. I mentioned my concerns to no-one, as I had the feeling that there was something fishy going on, and felt reasonably sure that one or more of the board members must be in on it.

I arrived at the health farm at about 4:00pm on a Tuesday afternoon. There was a gravel drive winding up between an avenue of trees, to a two-story country manor house. There were wide green lawns, a little parking lot, and some tennis courts to one side. A broad sweep of steps led up to a grand entranceway. I walked up the steps, feeling a little bit anxious about what I might find. Inside the doors was a reception area, like a hotel check-in counter. I walked up to the counter, and introduced myself as the leader of the Church of Total Symmetry, and the manager was called. A thin man in his early forties emerged in short order. He had a pencil thin moustache, and his hair was black and shiny. He wore a waste coat and white shirt with the cuffs rolled to just below his elbows, and elegantly tailored black slacks, and shoes that had been professionally polished. He greeted me with a smile, holding out his hand, saying what a pleasure it was, or something of that nature. "Can I get you some tea or coffee? A drink perhaps? Juice?" he inquired solicitously. I said I would like an apple juice, and he indicated with a nod to the receptionist, who picked up a phone and ordered an apple juice. "To the Alpine Room, thanks Clare", added the manager, "and I will have a lemongrass tea". Then to me, he added, "I'm trying to stay off the caffeine. Bad for my ulcer." And he ushered me through a set of double doors into an elegant dining room with large panoramic photographs of the Swiss Alps on every wall. The dining settings were of solid oak, and a large fire place was situated in the middle of one wall. The room was empty at this time, and the fire place was dead. "It's quite private here", said the manager. "We don't begin serving dinner until 7:00pm, and the dining room is closed till 6:30pm. We won't be disturbed."

A waiter brought our drinks, and then departed. "We weren't expecting anyone from the Church this afternoon", said the man. "You're fortunate that I am on hand. I often have to attend to business at other locations." It was a mild rebuke, delivered in the exemplary fashion of the humble servant. "I wanted to pop in and see how things were going," I said, wondering what on Earth was going on and how I could prevent him from twigging to my total ignorance, while extracting the information I needed. "My personal interest in our transaction is very great, you understand," I said, hoping that it sounded convincing.

"Yes, of course", replied the manager. "I can assure you that he is being cared for exactly as we specified. However, all the same, I think I should reiterate that it's not altogether wise for you to make a habit of these visits, given the circumstances. Our agreement was that there was to be a minimum of contact, and I do think it's best that we keep it that way."

"I do understand", I replied, "And you can be sure that I won't be making a habit of these visits. But you know of course that I have replaced Vortan as the church leader. I would like to see him in person, if you don't mind," I said, hoping I had left room for myself to maneuver if I was wrong in my supposition.

"You do realize, of course, that the process is only half completed", said the man, raising an eyebrow at me. I could see that he was beginning to entertain a hint of suspicion, sensing that something wasn't quite right. Yet he couldn't very well refuse me any reasonable request. I nodded. "Come with me," he said. We walked along several corridors, and up a flight of stairs. "As agreed," he said, "he is being sedated through the whole process. The cosmetic changes are very far reaching, and must be accomplished in several steps. A period of healing is required after each piece of surgery." We had reached a door, and as he opened it and showed me in. "Please don't touch him. We must be very careful of introducing any infectious agents."

I saw in a hospital bed a supine figure hooked up to monitors and intravenous drips. His face was swaddled in bandages. "The last operation was only three days ago. It was the nose. The hands and fingerprints are scheduled for tomorrow. Then we have the right eye to adjust, and to alter the shape of the skull, and finally remove some leg bone to reduce his height."

I had no doubt that the figure was Vortan, though all that showed of his head was some hair. I nodded, and we turned to go. There was a nurses' station down the hall, and two white uniformed sisters were in attendance. They both nodded as we walked past. "As you can see, everything is proceeding smoothly, and he is being looked after impeccably."

We made our way back to the reception area. "I do hope that your visit has allayed any concerns you might have had", said the manager. "Yes, of course," I replied.

"I feel that it would be best, in future, if we stick to the agreed channels of communication, and adhere to the schedule, unless of course a matter of urgency arises," he said, investing his voice with a mix of mild rebuke, impeccable civility, and condescension.

"Of course," I replied again, and held out my hand. We shook hands briefly, and with that we were at the grand entranceway. He held the door open for me, and I exited into the sunshine, and walked down the sweep of front steps. My knees felt quite weak, and my mind was whirling. I reached my car, and hardly conscious of what I was doing, drove back down the drive, and returned to town.

I began to think about what I had seen and heard. Vortan was getting cosmetic surgery to change his entire appearance, even down to his fingerprints. An arrangement with the Church was in place, of which I was kept in ignorance. By an oversight, my ignorance was not specifically known to the health farm. But there were more questions here than answers. Was Vortan being transformed against his will? Or was it something he himself had planned? Was the Church leadership still conspiring with Vortan? Or against him? In either case, it showed that the board of governors was quite capable of keeping me in ignorance when they felt like it. Maybe Vortan had got sick of the Church of Total Symmetry, and wanted to start afresh with a new identity. Or maybe the Church of Total Symmetry wanted him out of the way, but didn't want to actually kill him out right. I began to think that I myself might be in danger, if I began to seriously challenge the board's plans. There was one thing that I was certain of, however, and that was that I wanted to get to the bottom of it. But as to how, that was something about which I had no idea.

So I resolved to keep my eyes and ears open, and see if I could pick up any clues which might bring things into focus. As I drove, it dawned on me that in all probability, my visit would soon be known to whoever on the board was the usual point of contact with the Happy Valley Health Farm. And I began to wonder what repercussions might eventuate.

The next morning as I came into my office, I was met by several members of the board. There was Vortan's wife, Doreen, Peter McHenchly, and Bradley Crumb, two corporate types with power suits and immaculately combed silver gray hair parted on the side. Together they were the powerhouse behind the corporate functioning of the church, and pulled major salaries. They were, in fact, my major suspects in the strange goings on concerning Vortan and the Happy Valley Health Farm. The three of them were looking decidedly glum.

"Vortan's passed," said Doreen.

"What?" I replied. "You mean he's dead?"

"I'm afraid so," said McHenchly. "Heart Attack."

"It's the danger age," said Crumb.

"Hold on a sec," I said, looking pointedly at Doreen. "Didn't you tell me that Vortan was heavily medicated and incapable of any engagements?"

Doreen's face reddened. McHenchly and Crumb exchanged a glance so quickly that I almost missed it.

"That's the story," said McHenchly. "Heart attack while jogging. Can't have the members knowing he was undergoing rapid detoxification from heroin addiction. There's a small but finite risk of heart failure. Unfortunately Vortan was out of luck."

"We think it would be a good idea if you were to make a statement to the members," said Crumb. "We've put something together that should fit the bill. You know the sort of thing that's called for on an occasion like this. What a marvelous fellow, dearly missed, founded the Church, introduced thousands to the Teachings, finally found liberation, taken in untimely fashion, still so much to give, grieved by friends, family and followers, you know." He was holding out a sheaf of papers. "Give you a few ideas," he said. "You know, it's hard to think straight sometimes at a time like this, grief being what it is."

McHenchly was nodding solemnly all the while. "There's a press conference at two. You'd better get the make-up team to do you a grieving face. Make it look convincing," he said. "You too," he added to Doreen, as he and Crumb exchanged another glance, and prepared to leave.

"Come on," said Doreen, "We'll go over your statement."

"Remember, two o'clock," said Crumb. "We'll be back at one thirty to brief you on any developments, and provide any backup during the conference."

I watched the two suited figures disappear down the hall. Then I turned to Doreen, saying, "I don't believe a word of it. It's time you leveled with me. Vortan is the king of the schmucks, and I, for one, don't intend to publicly laud him on the occasion of his so-called death. I don't even believe he's dead. It's just another of his scams, and Crumb and McHenchly, and for all I know, you as well, are in it up to the eye-balls." Doreen was looking distinctly edgy. "We'd better go into my office", I said.

Doreen shook her head. "They'll be listening. There are listening devices everywhere. Vortan had them installed so he could pretend to know things about people by his psychic power."

It was time for a quick decision. "I'm out of here," I said. "And you're coming with me." I grabbed her arm, and started walking towards the elevator. She made no effort to resist, and I could sense the palpable relief. "We are just walking straight out the front door. If anyone asks, we are going to get a cup of coffee down the street, and a breath of fresh air." But no one said anything. As we passed out into the street, I sensed a great wave of relief washing through her. It was mid morning, and the sun was shining. The street seemed bright and cheerful.

We walked a few blocks, and ducked into a little cafe, and ordered drinks. A carrot juice for me, and cappuccino for Doreen. When the drinks arrived, I said, "Now, what exactly is going on? And before you answer, I already know where Vortan has been for the last few months, and the cosmetic surgery."

She looked momentarily surprised. "It was originally Vortan's plan. He was sick of playing at being the big guru, and wanted to escape. But he wanted to keep the money and the income. His plan was to fake his own death, construct a new identity, and live comfortably on interest bearing securities held offshore. Crumb and McHenchly told me about it. I thought they were outraged, like I was. They convinced me that the best thing to do was to quietly play along with his plans, and once his identity was changed, to cut him adrift. He could never prove who he was, and without our help, he would not be able to access any of the church funds, or the funds he has squirreled away in his own name. He would just be this loony claiming to be the famous guru. It seemed like such poetic justice, that I went along with it. They said that the members would be able to trust me, as Vortan's wife, and accept what I say. But then I started to have second thoughts about it, and for all Vortan's failings and hide bound materiality, I wondered if anyone really deserved that fate. Then I began to fear that McHenchly and Crumb might really be planning to kill Vortan. I over heard them talking one night. Now I'm scared that if they realize what I know, that my own life will be at risk."

Pieces of the jigsaw were beginning to fall into place. "Do you know the usual protocol for contacting the Happy Valley Health Farm?"

"Well, that used to be my job. Now Crumb has taken it over."

"If we try contacting them, they'll know something is wrong. I think it's better if we just go out there."

"What for?"

"To rescue Vortan, of course!"

"He's under sedation. He needs medical care. We just can't whisk him away without preparation. He might really die!"

"What about that doctor devotee, Cheryl Adams. She seems to be a true believer. Do you think we can trust her on this?"

"She doesn't have anything to do with the board. I think she's OK," replied Doreen.

Fortunately I had been seeing her as my personal physician for the last month, and had her number programmed into my cell phone. I called her up. "Hi Cheryl, it's me. Yes. Don't have much time, but we have a bit of a medical emergency with Sri Vortan. Can you meet us on the corner of Columbus and Twelfth. We'll need a car. He's been under heavy sedation, and we need to move him in a hurry. I'll explain on the way. Yes Doreen's with me. OK."

"She's on her way", I said. "Let's go. She's going to pick us up on the corner of Columbus and Twelfth in five minutes. And you're still on the board, aren't you?"

"Yes," replied Doreen. "But Crumb and McHenchly really run everything."

"Well, as leader of the church, I also have a seat on the board. In an emergency, two board members have the power to make legally binding temporary arrangements, which must be confirmed by the full board within thirty days. We need to terminate the Happy Valley's contract concerning Vortan's care immediately. Then they can't stop us from removing him. We need a legal declaration to present them with."

"I could work it up on my laptop as we drive out there. It's at home though."

"What about printing it out?"

"There's a Quickie-Blinks copy center out by Rumball's Hill. It's on the way. I can't believe I'm doing this. There's a time I would have gladly left Vortan to his fate."

I said nothing. I felt that there was more to this than meets the eye. Spirit works in strange ways, indeed, and I would never have thought that it could inspire me to feelings of tenderness and a protective instinct towards the man who had caused such misery in my life. Yet I enjoyed the irony of it. And in spite of everything, I knew that though Vortan was feckless, vain, venal, greedy, thoughtless and self-obsessed, he wasn't thoroughly evil, and didn't deserve to die. Crumb and McHenchly, however were a different story. They inspired me with nothing but coldness and dread. They seemed capable of any action to preserve their self-interest. My thoughts were interrupted by a large black station wagon pulling up in front of us. It was Cheryl. She was one of those members with such love and unquestioning devotion, that the whole atmosphere around her seemed to radiate peacefulness and light. She had transferred her devotion to me, as the new leader of the Church, and I could sense that she was in total awe of being in my presence, and being asked to personally help out. I felt I bore her an enormous responsibility for her trust and devotion, and prayed to Spirit that I would be worthy of it, that I wasn't leading her into a situation where she would be endangered.

"We need to swing by Doreen's apartment. Its on West 22nd. It won't take us out of the way." I was trying to focus my thoughts, and decide what I could tell Cheryl in the short time that we had. I wanted her to be fully cognizant of the situation. Yet her faith In Vortan, which had so obviously sustained her and developed her to this point would need to be destroyed in order for her to be able to fully comprehend the situation.

"Do you still visualize Vortan in your meditations?" I asked her.

"Well, no." She replied. "I use your image now as the inner Guru. Ever since you issued that Bulletin."

"Good", I said. "It's time to move onto a new spiritual dimension. Consider this an initiation. You've earned it with your devotion and love. It's time to change the focus of your devotions. That's what this initiation is about. A human form is useful for a time. But the inner image and form of the Guru can only take you so far. It's a form that the mind manifests out of your own radiant nature. Vortan's form was yourself. My form within you, is yourself. I am no different from you, and neither is Vortan. It's a spiritual blindness to elevate us on to such a pedestal. It's useful for a time. Because it enables us to develop humility, devotion and love. But then it becomes a barrier, because the Truth must be your guiding light. Just as you transferred your devotions from the form of Vortan, to my form, this initiation is about transforming them to the formlessness of Spirit. You have the connection with Spirit. It's time to take a step, and grow towards Spiritual Maturity."

The words were pouring out of me, and I felt a great light was sizzling within me and around me. Cheryl was still driving, but the tears were streaming down her face, she was nodding her head as I talked. I noticed that Doreen was also crying in the back seat.

By this time, we had arrived at Doreen's apartment. As Doreen raced in to retrieve her laptop, I tried to explain the situation to Cheryl as clearly and succinctly as possible, in a way that wasn't too overwhelming.

"Disillusionment", I said to her "is an unavoidable step on the Spiritual Path. It's something that we should welcome. It means that the illusions that kept us separated from the Truth are stripped away. It can be a painful process. But the Spiritually mature being cannot harbor illusions of whatever nature. Actually we are never completely free of illusion in this world, but we learn to recognize them and strip them away. The Guru relationship that you developed within yourself, though it has lead you towards the truth, has done so by fostering an illusion. That illusion is the perfection of Vortan, and now myself. But neither of us is perfect. We too are limited beings, with faults and imperfections. So now it is time for the mask to be stripped away. For you to see your guru's in the light of truth. However this is also your stepping stone to a greater maturity, greater self confidence, and acknowledgement of your own Divine power. You understand me?"

"I think so", she was saying. "Like a child thinks it's parent is perfect and all powerful, and then becomes a teenager and realizes how human they are."

"Exactly. Remember, you created the Guru within yourself, by the power of your devotion and love."

Doreen was running down the steps again, and jumped into the car. "OK", I said, "Lets go. Head west on Rumbill Boulevard."

There was a few minutes silence as Cheryl digested what I had told her, and I marshaled my thoughts.

"This initiation is not at all what I expected", she said.

"You're going to find that with some more things I have to tell you", I said, unable to resist the dramatic irony of the situation. "Now, I mentioned to you that I believe that Vortan is in danger, and that we are going to retrieve him from the Happy Valley Health farm. He is currently there, not on a spiritual retreat, as has been given out to the Church Members, but for rather more disappointing reasons."

"I see," said Cheryl. "Is he there against his will?"

"Well, that's difficult to answer. You see Vortan was not the enlightened being that we all thought he was. In fact he was a smart crook with a good PR machine."

"It's not true!" interjected Cheryl. "How can you say that about him!"

"I told you that disillusionment is painful. I just want you to be prepared, because you are going to have to give him appropriate medical care. He is under heavy sedation, and undergoing a series of cosmetic operations to alter his appearance. He had become bored with being the big Guru, and was organizing an escape hatch for himself with the help of Church funds diverted to off shore bank accounts. However I have reason to believe that his life is in danger. The people he left in charge of the church decided that they would be better off with him out of the way all together. They called a press conference this afternoon to announce his death from a heart attack while jogging. I am not sure what they have planned, but I fear for Vortan's life. So we are on our way to rescue him!"

We had reached the copy center by this time, and pulled into the car-park.

"I hate to interrupt," said Doreen, "But I need to run this contract termination by you. Whereas the Church of Total Symmetry and the Happy Valley Health Farm have been parties to a contractual arrangement for the provision of services by the Happy Valley Health Farm (the Service Provider) to the Church of Total Symmetry (The Service Receiver), it is unilaterally declared that all such contractual obligations be suspended indefinitely, and that properties, personnel and instruments belonging to, retained by, or associated with the Church of Total Symmetry be surrendered immediately on request to it's offices. The parties will enter into immediate mediation to determine outstanding liabilities, which shall not include loss of income after the expiration of one month or other than the cessation of receipt of monies by the Happy Valley Health Farm from the Church of Total Symmetry in accordance with the suspended contract."

"That sounds like it should do the job for us," I said. Doreen then made a dash for the copy center.

"You know," said Cheryl, "I always had in the back of my mind that there was something just a little bit off beam with Vortan. But I always just pushed it away again. Like it was the specter of doubt in the Master. There were rumors about all his trips to the Caribbean. But you just have to trust the Master. And his writings were just so spot on, for me. They erased all my doubts. That's why I just can't believe it."

"You're right, his discourses are great inspirational stuff. I know exactly how you feel. But they weren't written by Vortan at all. Most of them were written by Vortan's old teacher, a guy called Pompous McNinney. It's all documented on a web page somewhere."

"But I thought that was the tricks of Satan, trying to divert us from the path."

"Did you ever hear about Satan in the teachings before Vortan whipped him out to frighten people out of taking criticism seriously?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I don't recall, really..."

"Well, take my word for it. You'll see shortly just what sort of person Vortan is. That is if we are in time!"

By this time, Doreen was back with a couple of printouts, and we were in motion again. "I got a spare", said Doreen. "I'm not sure why. For reference, you know..."

She handed over a copy, and I signed it with a flourish. She countersigned.

"It's very likely that Vortan will be unconscious, as a result of sedation or anesthesia. Do you have the necessary supplies to deal with whatever eventuality that implies?"

"We just have to keep his fluids up, I have plenty of saline. And if his heart stops, we need to give him cardiac massage until we get him to a hospital. I also have adrenaline for that eventuality. I have breathing apparatus and oxygen. I can monitor his pulse and blood pressure as we drive."

"Good," I said. "Well, now you are prepared for what you will meet. Sorry to dump this on you. But it is an emergency!"

Cheryl drove in silence, but I could see that a steely determination had replaced the gushing eager beaver, and I felt that she would be OK. Events were moving quickly, and I could see that her professional doctor's training was now in the fore, and she was readying herself to deal professionally and impeccably with what we might find. Which was just as well, because we were driving up the drive of the Happy Valley Health Farm. To my dismay, A large black hearse was parked in front of the steps.

"I hope we're not too late", said Cheryl.

Vortan's Spiritual Experience

Compiled from his notes.

I could see my body on the bed below. I knew that something was wrong, but at the same time I felt incredibly peaceful and at ease. And believe me, that was something that I was not used to feeling. I watched somewhat dispassionately as three woman ran into the room. One of them seemed to be a doctor, and she quickly seemed to be checking things. Then they picked me up and put me in a wheel chair, and began to wheel me out of the room. I felt nothing but a mild curiosity. I followed them as they put my body into a car, and then drove off. This is great, I was thinking. They must be giving me good drugs. I must remember to order some more of them. Then it began to strike me as odd that three woman had made off with my body. I felt no desire to follow them. After all, I was quite comfortable here, and they seemed to be feeding me the right chemicals. However, it began to disturb me that I was floating around and my body had disappeared. "I couldn't be dead," I thought. "I don't feel at all unwell." I went back to my room, and sure enough my body was gone, so I floated down and sat on the bed. I tried to hook myself up to the intravenous drips, but, silly me, I wasn't able to actually grab hold of them. "If I'm dead", I thought, "where's that dashed tunnel of light we always hear so much about. It's all a bunch of baloney, anyway, I bet."

Then this voice said to me "You can't see the tunnel of light. Your spiritual eye is closed." Next to me was this figure that looked for all the world like Yoda from star wars. About three feet tall, and a broad face, with long pointed ears. I got quite a shock. "What hogwash", I said. "It's all just force of imagination." The

creature laughed rather disconcertingly. "I didn't think it would be much use," it said. And continued sitting there.

"Didn't think what would be much use?" I asked.

"Telling you anything of value," the creature replied.

"And why should you want to tell me anything of value?" I inquired, somewhat caustically, wondering how I could get rid of this uncomfortable creature, and get back to my pleasant floating about.

"You are not dead yet", said the creature. "Your body lives, and will continue to do so indefinitely, given the right conditions. You are however on death's doorstep. And maybe they will decide there's no hope for you, which I don't think there is, and cut short your useless life before you do too much more damage. It's compassion. But, that's not for me to say. I am your guide on a short journey, the purpose of which is to awaken you."

"I'm awake already, thanks very much," I replied. "And enjoying my life very well to boot."

"Enjoyed your life, you mean. With that sort of attitude, I'll be calling the angel of death, and she can take over. There's no going back once she's in the picture, you know. So my advice would be to shut up, and see if you can perhaps overcome enough of your vanity and pretensions to have a shot at correcting your errors"

I was momentarily nonplussed. "What errors?" I thought to myself. I was rather proud of how things were going with the Church. Soon I would be swanning around in the Caribbean on a permanent basis, while some other poor coot had to stand up and play guru for the masses.

"Exactly," said the creature. "You're playing with a lot of people's lives with that church of yours. The time is coming when you will have to reckon up what is owed."

"We don't allow people to shop on credit anymore. Too many hassles", I said.

"What you owe them," replied the voice.

"I don't owe them a thing!" I laughed. "If they're gullible enough to give me their money then it's their own fault. People are no better than sheep!"

Suddenly I became aware that I was no longer in the hospital room. I was floating in a river, and up ahead of me there seemed to be some kind of whirlpool. I began to feel afraid that it would suck me under, and I tried to swim for the shore. But the current was too strong, it grabbed hold of me, and I became terrified, swimming and flailing about as I was swept around and around, faster and faster. I began to shout, which turned to cries of terror, and then I was sucked under into the black water. I tried to hold my breath as long as I could, but finally, I had to breathe. Little stars had begun to appear everywhere. I sucked in a lung-full of water, expecting to choke and drown, only to find that I could breath just as well as ever. The stars were all around me in the blackness, and I seemed to be sinking gently through space, until I ever so lightly touched the ground.

"This is the womb of the great mother," said the voice of the creature, although I couldn't see him. "It is infinitely creative, and will take form from the power of your intentions and the contents of your heart."

I knelt on the ground, placing my hands in front of me. The ground felt warm and soft, and there was a slight mushroom smell coming off of it. I felt the ground under my hands begin to move, and I became frightened. Suddenly, it seemed like everything around me was writhing snakes. They were in my hands, crawling around my neck, over my face, on my belly, around my legs. Once again, I began to cry and pant with terror. The stars all blinked out, there was complete blackness, and I felt like I was being strangled and choked.

In the midst of my terror and panic, I heard a deep humming sound, which was accompanied by a soft orange light. It was coming from the Yoda creature, and as the light intensified, I could see that there were no snakes, only some vines, and fields of flowers, with scattered trees as far as the eye could see. The vines fell away from me, and I stood up, admiring the flowers.

“The mother brings forth according to the energy of your heart,” said the creature. “Come.”

I was still a bit shaken by all this, but as we walked along I began to feel better. And as I felt better, I could feel my sense of indignation rise. Who was this creature just expecting me to follow him about? Astral worlds or not, it had no right to insist on anything from me. I had almost worked up sufficient outrage to start venting at the creature, when we arrived at a well. In spite of myself, I noticed that it was beautiful. There was a stone wall around the well about 4 feet high. There was no cover or roof, but there was a bucket attached to a rope coiled on the ground. At the base of the stones grew some yellow flowers and some leafy weeds, and there were lines of moss in the joins between the rocks.

“Those who can’t ascend, must first descend,” said my guide. He made a sharp movement with his hand, and suddenly I found myself hurtling face first down the well, into pitch darkness. A high pitched wailing noise was echoing all around me, adding to my terror, until I realized it was the noise of my screams. Then I landed headfirst in mud. As I tried to breathe I felt the fetid slime crawling into my throat and lungs, filling me with dank glue as I struggled in utter panic. There were creatures in the mud. In my terror I imagined them to be crabs and scorpions, and they began to sting and pinch my face, eating away my flesh. As I thrashed and struggled, I just sank deeper into the mud, choking and unable to breathe, I couldn’t help sucking wads of it inside me. The pincers and the stings continued, and then I felt one of them beginning on my eye, pecking away at it, each peck a searing bolt of agony. I was weeping and crying, I don’t know what I was saying, I was calling on God and the Angels, on all the masters to help me. I was cursing them all for being impotent fools. I was by turns angry and terrified and all the while the crabs were eating at me. After a while, I felt like I was nothing but bones, all my flesh was eaten off, and then one by one my bones fell out of their joints, until I was only a skull, lying there in the mud. There was no more pain. Presently I felt myself, as a skull, being taken up in someone’s hand. I felt hands smoothing off the mud. But everything was still dark. Then I was placed upon something cold and hard, it felt like a metallic surface. I felt one hand steadying something at my brow. There was a whoosh and an almighty crack, followed by a searing bolt of pain, and a blinding flash of blue light. After a few seconds the blue died down a bit, and I found that I could see, even though everything seemed to have a bluish tinge to it.

A voice which I recognized to be that of my guide, said “You see through the power of an amethyst crystal, which has been hammered into your third eye. It will absorb negativity, which is a problem for you, and help to keep your third eye open. That is the only way for you to see in this world.”

His hands lifted me up from the anvil, for that is what I saw that I had been lying on, and an arched doorway appeared in the blackness in front of us.

“We have someone to meet,” said my guide, and we walked through the opening.

We were in a rough hewn rock passageway, sloping gently down. The walls were damp and an earthy smell filled my nose hole. Soon the passageway became very low, and my guide, short though he was, was bending double. The passageway continued to get smaller, and very soon my guide was crawling along, pushing me, still a skull, along in front of him. The passage then opened out into a large cavern. In the walls and roof were crystals and gems of many colors. A large fire was roaring in a metal cauldron in the center of the cave. I marveled at the crystals, catching and reflecting the red and orange of the flames. I thought that someone had painstakingly chipped around each crystal, freeing it from the rock, and polishing it in place. I became aware of a sound of wailing, like a storm wind blowing through barren crags. The floor of the cavern seemed to be composed of misshapen people half melted into the stone of the floor. All the while, they were groaning and crying.

“What has happened to those poor people?” I asked of my guide.

“They are the too rigid ones. They became set in their ways, and unable to change. Thus they failed to respond appropriately to those around them, and the challenges of their lives. They never felt the pain caused by their emotional immaturity. Now they are gradually working their way out of the rock by expressing and feeling the pain they locked away inside of them. When they have felt and expressed it adequately, they will be free of the rock, and will be reborn into another human life.

“What an awful punishment!” I said.

“Oh no,” replied my guide. “They have agreed to it. It will save them many wasted incarnations being unnecessarily rigid, and so creating additional karmic debt.”

We reached the side of the cauldron, and even though I was no more than a skull, I could feel the searing heat coming off the fire. I saw that my guide had a poker in his hand, with which he struck three times on the side of the cauldron. There was a raw of flame, and in the midst of the flames, I saw appear an imposing figure. He was black skinned, with two shiny black bulls horns on his head. His blood red lips were parted in a fierce grin, showing white teeth like those of a wolf. There was a large red eye in the middle of his forehead, as well as the usual two in the normal position. He had a necklace of skulls around his neck, and his face and bare chest were covered in tattoos of dragons, tigers and coiling snakes. Bright red and yellow trousers covered the lower half of his imposing and frightening figure.

He locked his gaze on mine. I was aware of a great and powerful presence. It was like I was suddenly moving down in an express elevator. I became aware of tendrils of yellow energy reaching out from me to all the people in my life. Most of them were associated with the Church of Total Symmetry. Some of those currents led off into regions of light and happiness. However there were quite a few that led into some very murky areas. Some of these tendrils were like great weights, pulling me down into blackness. I knew that these were people that I had harmed, or had been harmed through my feckless use of authority. I began to see them before me in my mind’s eye. People who had trusted me, and loved me sincerely, but who I had used and betrayed, and wiped out of my life.

“They all disserved it,” I said to the figure. “If they were so stupid to trust me, it’s there own fault.”

The figure opened it’s mouth, and a withering blistering hot wind came out of it, and I found myself tumbling over and over, like an autumn leaf in a squall. I bounced against rocks, a couple of times, then rolled into a passageway, which became steeper and steeper. I rolled, picking up speed, bouncing from wall to wall. At each impact there was a resounding crash throughout my skull, and I soon had the most splitting headache. Then I was falling through blackness. I kept waiting to hit the bottom, and shatter into a thousand pieces. But I just kept falling.

“Boy, you really pissed off the Karma Lord,” said the voice I recognized as my guide. “Don’t worry. I’ll meet you again when you have done your time.”

Then I was alone again. After what seemed a very long time, I hit some water with a splash. As my vision cleared, I could see that I was under some water. Above me was a small oval of light. It seemed like I was wedged into position. I was still a skull, as far as I could make out. Then I saw a shadow appear over me. It seemed I could make out someone away on the surface dropping their trousers. They sat down over me, and I can’t begin to tell you the disgust I felt as they went about their business. For I realized that I was formed into the porcelain of a toilet bowl, the outlet going right through my mouth, so that I was forced to taste and smell everything. There was nothing I could do but put up with it. It seemed like I spent months down there. I began to be an expert on people’s excrement. No matter how rich or famous, how wise or beautiful, there was no difference in how their wastes made me feel like retching. For the first months, I was angry and bitter, cursing that horned devil who sent me here, and cursing every pair of buttocks that appeared on my horizon. I planned revenge on them all. Then I began to get used to it, and started to kid myself that I was even enjoying it. And then it just got interminably boring, with no let up in the endless disgusting procession of anuses evacuating through me. Then, as my eyes got used to the refraction of the water, I began to think that I was recognizing some of the people that were using my toilet. Although, it was hard to

recognize people from that angle, I eventually saw that they were all members of the Church of Total Symmetry. I was trapped in the Church Toilets! When I realized this, I became angry again. But I was completely powerless. And as time went by, it died down, and I became resigned to my situation. And then one day, I began to chuckle softly to myself, as I saw the irony of it all. As I chuckled, there was a great cracking sound, and I was born away on a great spout of water. I was still a skull, but now being lifted up into the sky. The waterspout kept rising up, and it was such a relief to have that fresh pure water all around me, washing my skull inside and out, and clearing away the lingering odor. Suddenly this huge tennis racket came sweeping through the sky, and I found myself as the ball in a tennis match between two giants. One was white, and one was black. The black one looked just like the Karma Lord I met in the fire cauldron. The white giant looked like a merry over weight Buddha, with big pendulous ears. They were running energetically this way and that, whacking me backwards and forwards, and laughing and roaring at each other. They made a tremendous racket each time they banged down a foot, not to mention their whooping and roaring. Finally, the white Buddha made a great leap, and whacked at me with an overhead smash, sending me crashing into the ground just out of the black giant's reach. I was pulverized into smithereens, and after the initial shock, I had an instant of feeling as if I was part of everything. Then a squall of wind came along, and the parts of the skull that I had been were so tiny that they were just bone dust carried away by the wind. Surprising as it may seem, though, I was still conscious, even though there was nothing left of me but millions of bits of dust. The wind took me here and there. It left some of me in the forests, some of me in the mountains. Some of me went into the sea. Some of me went into the bricks people used to build their houses. And as my bits became separated, I remembered less and less of who I was, and what had happened to me. I don't know how long this dim dream lasted. But eventually I began to stir awake again. However, I was completely without any body. I seemed to be floating in a kind of void, and it was very nice too. Then I felt a pulling sensation, though to be honest, I don't know how I could, as I had no body to feel it in.

I began to move more quickly. I saw the Yoda creature again. He was blowing through a straw. And suddenly I was swept up and moved along the straw by his breath. From inside it was a long tunnel, and I careened along it like a wild waterslide. I could see a round patch at the end, a patch of light. I heard the creature's voice echoing in my mind, "Remember". And as the sound died away, I had complete recall of everything that had happened to me since leaving my body. Suddenly, with a whump I was out the end of the tunnel. I had a brief image of myself lying on a bed in a strange room, and then it was like I was sucked down into my body.

Immediately, I opened my eyes.

"Thank God," said a woman I had never seen before. "You're alive. We thought we had lost you."

I looked at her, and I could see that she was beautiful. She had a rich head of wavy dark red hair. Maybe she's put a rinse through it, I thought. But it went very well with her face, and she had such a pleasant energy, she seemed to be radiating a kind peaceful light around her. "Her aura," I thought to myself, "I can see her aura! Well I'll be danged, they really do exist after all!"

She came over closer to me, and I watched her movements, following her with my eyes and head. It seemed like I was basking in the rays of sunshine and warmth that were shining out of her. I wondered what I had ever done to deserve the attention of such a saint. I didn't want anything to interrupt this moment of such beauty and innocence. As if in response to that selfish motivation, two other woman came into the room. One of them I recognized immediately as my wife, Doreen. Actually I had never felt comfortable calling her my wife. I had taken advantage of her, to be brutally honest, and after I had gotten used to her, didn't really like her around that much, because she reminded me of how I was making a mockery of love. Now however, I saw that she also had an aura. It was a little different to the first woman. I could see that there were some dirty red streaks in her aura, particularly around her private bits. But even so, there was an overall sensation of lightness. However, I sensed that she was careful to keep herself neutral towards me. What struck me about the third woman was an alert presence. Her aura was quite invisible, but I could feel it so much more strongly than that of the others. It was focussed awareness energy, and I felt it touching me, sensing that I was perfectly healthy, and enjoying the attentions of three attractive women.

“So,” said the third woman, “the great Sri Vortan. We finally get a chance to meet. You’ve had a lucky escape. Spirit obviously has more in store for you. I can’t say that that will please a lot of people, my self included. However, here we are, for better or ill, and the clock is ticking. Can you hear what I am saying?”

I was looking at her, and while a part of me was hearing her words and understanding them, it seemed so unimportant really. I was admiring the way her energy swirled and glistened with her words, how it became denser and thinner with the rhythm of her speech. How certain syllables resonated in my stomach, others in my chest, and certain sounds seemed to ring inside my head. It seemed best to make no response. I felt that if I talked, this magic might disappear, and I was deeply in love with it, and these three woman. I felt I must on no account say anything, and that this would help me remain in this state of strange exaltation. So I continued to look at the woman, gazing deeply into her eyes as she looked at me. I saw no fear there, no power, not even any compassion. I just saw them seeing me, truly, without any illusions or barriers. I felt they saw into my very depths, and I was happy to be scrutinized, for I felt that wherever in my soul those eyes looked, they cleansed me and invigorated me. I wanted her to see all of me, everything I had ever done, and every desire within my heart. And as she saw these aspects of myself, I saw them also, and tears began to well in the corner of my eyes. I saw a frightened boy who wished to be taken seriously, who wanted to be a step ahead of everyone else, but was really a step behind. I saw a young man proud of his mind, and his power to reason, to understand, and to solve problems. And I saw a man who would rather pretend to greatness than aspire to it. I saw also how it could have been otherwise, with the addition of a little humility, and the ability to learn from my betters. In that moment I was heartily sick of the Church of Total Symmetry, into which I had put so much of my effort. Wasted effort, I thought in that moment. Effort into pretending to be something I was not. Effort into making people give me their money, give me their trust, give me their bodies, to give me their very souls. And with it all, I was still empty. And that’s the reason I had cooked up this scheme to rid myself of this huge stinking bloody albatross. All these bloody church of Total Symmetry devotees having Spiritual Experiences, and here’s me wanting that more than anyone. Yet I knew I was a crock of the proverbial, and that church devotees kept having spiritual experiences only convinced me how stupid and gullible people were, and how clever I was. Yet deep down I knew it was because these people really believed. And that Pompous’s discourses were really working for them. Everywhere I looked, I was confronted by my own emptiness, my charade of Spirituality, and it just got too much for me. And here was this woman seeing it in my eyes, and it was such a blessed relief to feel the tears running down my cheeks.

As the tears turned into sobs, I felt wrenching pains throughout my body, especially my right shoulder, neck and throat. As if there was a great struggle going on inside me between someone intent on squeezing the pain back inside of me, and the pain itself, intent on emerging in my coughing groaning sobs. There was a moment in which I realized that it was me that was trying to squeeze all that pain back inside, and in that moment I knew it was pointless. The tears were coming, I was making an utter fool of myself in front of people I hardly knew, even though one of them was supposed to be my wife. I was crying for goodness knows what, my whole sorry performance, for growing up an asshole, for being vulnerable and never being able to show it, and I don’t know what else. And as the tears came, I felt muscles untwisting and aches disappearing and dissolving in my body as if by magic. In the midst of all these tears and aching grief, you would think that one might feel miserably unhappy. But nothing could be further from the truth. As each wrenching sob was released from my mouth, I felt a calmness and connection that I had never before felt in my life. I felt that there was something greater and more important, more real, more universal than my petty mind, and my petty concept of self. And that my self, my true self, was part of it, and here it was, pushing aside my mind, and crying it’s pain and grief, and it was the sweetest most blessed moment of my life.

Presently, the sobs and grief died away, and I saw that my three companions had also been crying. They were wiping their eyes and blowing their noses. I pushed myself up into a sitting position in the bed. We looked at each other, and for a moment no-one said a word. “Ah,” I said after a few moments. “That feels better.” I felt a twinkle in my eye. A very strange sensation, because I had never felt a twinkle in my eye before. And I looked at the three women again, and before we knew it, we were all laughing uproariously. I felt a great surge of heat in my belly, like a fuzzy hot ball of energy, and it was radiating out in all directions. It all seemed so hysterically funny. The Church of Total Symmetry, and the seriousness with which we all took it, and my operations to change my identity, and my trip to the other realms, and being kidnapped by three woman.

However, there must have been a certain hysterical edge in my laughter, because before I knew it, the woman with the penetrating eyes was shaking me, one hand on each shoulder. "Vortan, Vortan," she was saying "We need to make some decisions. Your life may well be in danger."

When she said this it set me off on fresh gales of laughter. She looked at the other woman, and I could see that they were all getting a bit frustrated and desperate.

"I'm sorry", I said. "I think I'm getting control of myself. Yes well. It's been quite a day. Danger you say?"

"Yes. The Church leaders want you out of the way, so they can take control of the cash flow of the Church without impediment. That's why we grabbed you from the clinic, in case they got to you there."

"Well that's very considerate of you." I replied. And I began to giggle again, a little hysterically. "But I don't understand why you would want to bother saving me. It's not as if I've done anything nice for any of you. I don't even know you," I said. "Well, except for you," I said to Doreen, "But that's even less reason to want to help me, I should think".

"Spirit works in strange ways," said the woman with the penetrating eyes. "It needs you for some purpose beyond my understanding. And you're right, if it wasn't for that, then it would be good riddance as far as I'm concerned. We just wanted to save your life. Now, until you're able to get about under your own steam, we are going to look after you. No matter how much it galls us."

"That's very considerate of you, I must say", I said again. "I do believe my plans are in a state of flux. Yes. A state of flux. I've been doing some thinking, and coming to some conclusions, and I do believe I have had a change of heart."

"What was the point of all those operations in the clinic? Was that your own choice?" asked Doreen.

"Well, yes and no. McHenchly suggested it. I had been complaining about having to keep up the bloody pretence of spirituality all the time."

"Humph," interjected Doreen, "You weren't doing much of a job, as far as I could see."

"Well, anyway," I continued, "His plan seemed like the perfect solution. Fake my own death, re-appear with a new identity and a generous annuity. A life of leisure and no responsibility to anyone. Has someone got a mirror. I want to see how my face came out. I spent weeks trying to select a new nose and cheek lines. Did they get the cleft in my chin right?"

"Oh please," said Doreen. But she produced a makeup mirror from her bag, and handed it to me. It was the first time I had seen my new face. There was still a little bit of swelling about the eyes and nose, but it was a distinctly different looking face. I found it so fascinating that I continued gazing at my reflection for quite some minutes, angling the mirror this way and that.

"I'm a new man, indeed", I said. "And not just appearances, either. While you were kidnapping me, I was having an out of body experience. A spiritual experience. And I'm a changed man! I'm happy! And I don't care two hoots for the Church of Total Symmetry."

"Well we do. We care a lot, and we care for all the spiritual seekers who stand to be betrayed and manipulated by those corporate rats that you left in charge." This was the woman with the eyes, flashing some passion through them.

"I don't believe we've met", I said.

"Let me introduce to you Sri Tenille Parker," said Doreen, "Spiritual leader of the Church of Total Symmetry."

“You don’t say!” I replied. “I see you actually believe in yourself. Good for you.”

“And the question is,” said Tenille, “What are we going to do?”

“How about a bite to eat?” I said. “I’m starving.”

So we ordered in some sushi rolls, at my insistence, and discussed the situation over lunch. The outcome of the discussion was that legally, I still called the shots at the Church of Total Symmetry. I could unilaterally cancel the appointment of McHenchly and his suited ilk, and the worst that could happen would be a breach of contract suit. Fortunately, I had been rescued before the completion of the operations, and I still retained the thumbprint on my left hand, - sufficient to identify me for legal purposes. Driving me was the insane desire to correct the mistakes I had made, and to try and do the right thing by the thousands of devotees who saw me as the great guru. Believe it or not. And my three rescuers found it hard to believe this at first. And I can’t blame them. I realized that only action on my part would convince them that I was sincere. I started to have pangs of regret about Sri Pompous as well. I remembered all the times I had spent in his company, learning the lessons he taught me, and cringed when I thought of stealing his discourse and publishing them in my own name. How could I have done that, I thought to myself. My life seemed such a transparent façade based on his genuine stature and spiritual achievement. And I suddenly realized that it was important for me to reconcile myself with my old spiritual mentor, as well as to make amends to the people that I had betrayed in such a fundamental and cynical way.

So we decided to make our way back to Church headquarters, make up the necessary documents, and deliver McHenchly and his cronies their marching orders. After which, an open forum would be held in which I would do the mea culpa thing, and confirm that Tenille was the new spiritual leader, with my blessing, and explaining where the discourses and teachings come from.

However things didn’t quite go as planned. By the time we got organized, I had been declared dead. And the church leadership, according to the terms of my will, was in the hands of the church board, who were, with the exception of two of my rescuers, the cronies or puppets of McHenchly. Tenille and Doreen were promptly dumped from the board, and expelled from the Church.

The Narrative Concludes

Sri Pompous Has Visitors

Life had been going very nicely at the Academy of Happiness. For several months, Sri Pompous had been untroubled by any news of Vortan the Deceptor, or the Church of Total Symmetry. At last, he was beginning to think that the Church was for him a thing of the past, and he could continue to concentrate his full attention on the new students and old devotees drawn to the Academy. He was quite surprised, late one night, to receive a phone call from a woman calling herself Tenille Parker, claiming to be the rightful leader of the Church of Total Symmetry. In spite of his protests that he had nothing to do with the Church, she insisted on meeting him, and he reluctantly agreed. A time was arranged for the next day, and he gave her the address of the Academy.

It would not be completely untrue to say that Sri Pompous was a little bit on the defensive about this meeting. In earlier days, he had enjoyed the situation with Vortan’s church. However the court-cases and enmity had worn even his legendary equanimity thin, and now he was only too happy to place Vortan and his Church completely behind him. However, always ready to surrender to the Divine Will, Sri Pompous knew in his Higher Self the necessity of this meeting, and the need for another round of cause and effect to play itself out. In his more human self, however, he had hoped he would have a bit more time to recover his energies and equilibrium!

The time of the meeting came, and Sri Pompous found himself unaccountably nervous. He was pacing back and forth in his office, and felt slightly bilious. He found this puzzling, as he could see no reason why he should be nervous. However he couldn't shake the feeling that unknown events were unfolding around him. Normally, he could banish any disquiet he was feeling very quickly, through opening to the Divine Message. However, the more he attempted this, the more agitated he became. He tried to take his mind off his anxiety, by developing the experience into a teaching discourse, but he kept coming back to the thought that he had said what he wanted to say. So he paced, observed himself, and waited.

When the doorbell rang, he was momentarily startled. He took a deep breath, and went and opened the door. There stood a woman, attractive in her maturity, with dark shoulder length hair. "Hi," she said. "Tenille Parker." Sri Pompous invited her in. He could see that this woman had a powerful aura around her, a strong connection to the Divine Source, and a focussed determination that was palpable. He identified a strong current of energy emanating from her, which was somehow intertwined with his own.

"I was until recently", she said, "the Spiritual Leader of the Church of Total Symmetry. And I have need of your advice."

Sri Pompous felt a great wave of compassion beginning in the depths of his being, cleansing him of the anxiety that had beset him. With those words, it seemed that everything had become crystal clear.

"Why me?" asked Sri Pompous. "How can I help you?"

"Everything of any worth in the Church of Total Symmetry comes from you," she said. "I thought you might be able to help us."

"I will if I can," said Sri Pompous, "But I don't know that there's much I can do. Wouldn't you be better off consulting lawyers and public relations experts?"

The woman laughed. "It's not the kind of advice I need. We want to free those trusting souls who are members of the Church of Total Symmetry in good faith. Mostly because they read your discourses, and saw the truth and wisdom contained in them. The Church is now totally controlled by cynical corporate types who see it as nothing more than a cash cow. They are subtly distorting your discourses, and introducing messages of fear and suspicion which have the effect of making the followers suspicious of outsiders, and fearful of leaving the Church. It is not good for people's spiritual unfoldment."

"No, I don't suppose it is", replied Sri Pompous. "So what would you like me to do about it?"

"It's not just me," said the woman. "There's more of us, who have been instrumental in making the Church what it is, and feel responsible for setting things to rights. We would like you to join forces with us, to create an exit service. For church members, so that the Truth about the history of their Church is available to them, and they can free themselves of this cynical exploitation, and carry on their spiritual growth."

"Isn't it already on the inter-net?" said Sri Pompous. "I'm sure Johnson Nudibranch set up something like that."

"Well," said Tenille, "We aim much bigger than that. We aim to have a book written about it, detailing the whole history of the Church, and Vortan's misuse of his position. And to do a media blitz with interviews and public engagements, including Vortan's public confession and apology to the Church members."

"I thought he was dead!" said Sri Pompous with some surprise. "It came over the news not three weeks ago! Heart attack while jogging, or something. I felt quite a pang. He used to be student of mind. Quite a likeable chap before he decided he wanted to start his own Church. I always hoped he'd come good in the end."

"The Church planned to kill him off. However, we rescued him in the nick of time."

Sri Pompous laughed heartily. "And what does Vortan think of your plans?" he asked.

"Mostly," replied Tenille, "It's his idea. He wants to set things right. In fact he would like to talk to you himself. Only he thought you might still be angry at him."

Sri Pompous let out another burst of infectious laughter, and Tenille found herself chuckling along with him. "Whatever gave him that idea, I wonder?" inquired Sri Pompous, and he found his own question so hilarious that he was soon slapping his thighs, and wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes.

Presently, Sri Pompous regained his composure. "Tell Vortan that I'll hear what he has to say. And then we'll see about joining your plans."

And so it was that only a few hours afterwards, Sri Pompous found himself sitting down at his kitchen table with Vortan, the erstwhile Deceptor. Vortan was looking very sheepish, and Sri Pompous, for all his illuminated life skills, was fidgeting and clearing his throat, and inquiring whether his guests would like more tea. Suddenly, Vortan sprang to his feet, almost knocking over his chair. "It's no use!" he cried. "This is ridiculous. I can't stand it any more. Why can't you be angry or something?" Sri Pompous was scratching his ear, and pretending to be surprised by a small piece of ear wax that had ended up on the end of his finger. "More tea?" he inquired solicitously.

"I'm not here for tea!" expostulated Vortan. "I'm here to apologise, and to tell you I've changed. I'm different. I want to be good, and to do the right thing." Vortan had begun pacing up and down the small kitchen. "I want to undo all the damage caused by the Church of Total Symmetry."

"Well," said Sri Pompous, "No need to apologize, after all, everything seems to be turning out right in the end, don't you think!"

"I don't know how you let me get away with it, creating that damn church. Now it's controlled by hoods and crooks and they would have killed me off if they could." Vortan bent down and placed his face only inches away from Sri Pompous's. "Don't you realise? They're ruining people's lives."

"And what would you like me to do about it?" asked Sri Pompous.

"Do about it? Do about it?" ranted Vortan, having almost completely lost his composure. He banged his fist into his open palm, and suddenly became very steely and determined. "We must stop them", he said. "It is my mission now to put an end to this sorry saga, and bring down the evil empire."

"Yes, well", said Sri Pompous. "Leave them to their own devices, I say. People will wake up to themselves sooner or later. And if they don't, well then, there is always the next re-incarnation. In the meantime, many of them are happy enough, don't you think?"

"That's just it!" said Vortan. "They are falsely happy. Deluded into complacent satisfaction. They are being robbed of their awareness of their own misery. It is a serious spiritual crime. And the leaders are no better than I was. Oh what a mess it all is. I can't just walk away from it. I must at least try to set it to rights."

"Well, I am sure you have your reasons. For me though, I have plenty to do here at the Academy. I don't have time for crusades of any description. My job is to teach and to guide those people who come to me. That's all. There's plenty of things need setting to rights in the world, and if we let it distract us from our true purpose, then no one is really any better for it."

At the mention of true purpose, Vortan began to shake and shudder, as if his body was suddenly possessed of independent life and motion. The shuddering worked its way up from his belly to his chest, and then his throat, and finally a great wrenching sob burst out of him, and he threw himself down into a chair, cradled his head on the table, and began crying uncontrollably, his whole body moving in concert with the wave of grief that seemed to have gripped him.

Sri Pompous again scratched his ear, this time with his little finger, and poured himself another cup of tea. He looked at the clock a couple of times, and glanced over at his computer screen – there were some study materials he was anxious to get completed, yet he remained sitting in his chair, observing his former student. His face softened almost imperceptibly, as he gazed on the figure before him, hunched over with such grief. And after a few moments, he closed his eyes. Almost instantly he was out of his body, in Soul form, observing from a position high above the kitchen table. With a well practiced flexing of his spiritual muscles, he yanked Vortan out of his body as well, which continued it's grieving, even as Vortan and Sri Pompous looked on from the perspective of pure energy. Communication does not take place in words in this state of consciousness, it's more as if the very beings meld, and energy exchanges carry knowledge and meaning with a depth, subtlety and completeness that those limited to verbal communication can hardly even begin to imagine. However, I will try to render the gist of the exchange in words, for the sake of the narrative.

“There,” said Sri Pompous. “Feel better? Look at that gray band around your energy body. The shadow of guilt. Has to be removed otherwise the Light is blocked. You’ll do more harm than good while your aura’s like that.”

“Guilt. I want to set things to rights. That’s how I can be free.”

“Not so. Guilt must first be erased. Then act in fullness of Light Consciousness. Otherwise Guides and Spirit beings can’t help.”

“How can I drop it?”

“Exactly. Move from here – above and beyond guilt – lightness of being.”

“Why am I crying so much?”

“Recognition of your true purpose. You agreed before coming into this life to help me with my teachings. There is much anguish in recognizing what you have forgotten.”

“How can I help you?”

“Forget about the Church of Total Symmetry. It will take care of itself. It’s not as bad as you think. People are benefited in spite of the delusion and manipulation that is being woven into the teachings. It is always the way with religions. It’s no better or worse than it’s always been with Truth, spiritual hunger, and the material world. The teachings have touched millions, thanks to you. Not quite in the way I would have planned, mind you! But there it is. The teachings will look after themselves. They carry the vibration of pure Soul Energy – and this energy will work it’s way into peoples heart’s and minds, and germinate in growth and change, in spite of the Church of Total Symmetry! Perhaps I was too timid, with my little Ashram – as always, Spirit’s plan is beyond conception. But now there is work to do.”

And then both Sri Pompous and Vortan were back in their bodies. Vortan’s body had stopped sobbing, and he looked up, and met his teacher’s gaze.

Epilogue

Vortan joined the staff of the Academy of Happiness, and publicly apologized for his actions while setting up and leading the Church of Total Symmetry, including his plagiarism of Sri Pompous’s materials. Of course this did not go unnoticed or unchallenged by the Church leadership. I don’t feel it’s necessary to go into the sordid details, as the story which I set out to tell, has essentially been told. In any case, the reader can well imagine the sort of things that the Church of Total Symmetry resorted to, and indeed, as this book

goes to print, are still resorting to. The bulk of the church members, for instance, still believe that Vortan died while jogging, and that the real Vortan is nothing but an imposter, whose intention is to divert them from the Truth! Yet, nevertheless, there is a steady stream of people leaving the Church of Total Symmetry, and many of them end up at the Academy of Happiness. Unfortunately, there is still a steady stream of new recruits to the Church, who emphasize now their ministry program, which is basically signing up as many people as you can. As you know, Sri Pompous passed over some years after the events related in this story. However the Academy of Happiness continues to be run by Vortan and Tenille, who devote their lives to passing on his teachings and wisdom. It is my sincere hope that this small volume has conveyed to you some of the wisdom and inspiration for which Sri Pompous was so well known, and inspires you in the cultivation of your own Spiritual Essence, so that you may give your Gift to Life, and find the fulfillment and satisfaction that is the birthright of all. Therefore, this volume would not be complete without a selection of the Discourses authored by Sri Pompous, and which have played such a prominent role in this story. They will be found in the appendix that follows, together with a short description of some of the Spiritual Practices that Sri Pompous recommended. These materials will, I am sure, repay careful study.

Robert Archer, 25th of June, 2000, Toronto.

Appendix

Discourse the First – Death of the Little Self.

“There’s no point in denying death. It is as natural a part of life as breathing. It is as natural as waking up in the morning, and going to sleep at night. No one is scared of shutting their eyes of a night time, and letting them selves drift off into unconsciousness. So why be afraid of dying? Of course we don’t get to wake up again in this world. In fact we don’t know if we get to wake up again at all. People will tell you all sorts of things about what happens after death. The Christians say one thing, the Buddhists another, the Hindus yet another. Believe it if it makes you feel better. But in fact it’s just another way we have of denying the hard fact of death within our lives. The reason it is such a confronting thing for most of us is because of the solidity of ego. We identify so intimately with the little individual self, and in death we see the dissolution of that identity, the end. This is very scary. So the fear of death comes from a wrong conception of self. What are we really? We are the larger self, a part of the intelligent conscious whole, an expression, an organ of life itself. Life goes on when we die, when our purpose is fulfilled, or our usefulness expended. And seeing ourselves as part of that wider life, there is no pain in releasing our individual identity matrix, because the greater Self, the whole, goes on. But somehow, this idea does not comfort us. It’s all very well to speak of the larger self, but all I know is my own individuality. So we fear, and comfort ourselves with our beliefs. In actual fact, this fear serves to cement us into our little selves, and try even harder to preserve it. But all such efforts mean a continuation of suffering, of separation. Another aspect of this secret is that it is not necessary to die physically in order to dissolve back into the greater Self. This is the greater death, the first death, the death of egotistical being, which is the birth of the Spiritual being.

Many people make the mistake of thinking that they can become spiritual by changing the way they act. They think that they can become spiritual by loving their neighbor. But in fact they have the cart before the horse. Once one becomes spiritual, one automatically loves one’s neighbor. To follow the commandment as a formula is to merely entrench separation between self and other. As long as there is self and other, there is fear. Love can become hate, and happiness can become sadness. There is envy and jealousy. There is comparison between what I have, and what you have, what I am and what you are. So as laudable as it seems to love one’s neighbor, this will not make for a spiritual person, unless the love is felt in the heart, and given as a gift from the ultimate one. Then there is no separation. And that is the essence of love. No separation. In fact the truth is that all of us are spiritual beings, whether we recognize it or not. We have just forgotten, temporarily, our true nature, the one nature, the one essence. When I say our true nature, it is not a possession of the little self. This is a common error that many make. That spiritual development is a badge of honor worn by the little self, acquired by the ego for proud display. Our true nature is not individual, but beyond collective. It is the essence out of which all things are manifested.

How can one know this true nature? You must sit quietly, and watch your breathing. You must sit quietly, and listen to all the sounds of creation. You must one by one let the layers of personality and aggregation that you have built around your center dissolve. By observing without attachment all the events of your inner being. And when you get to nothingness, behind the nothingness will be the essence of all. And you will see that the nothing is something after all. But even having arrived here, many students of the path fall into the illusion of Spiritual attainment. It becomes a means of separation of self from other, a mere possession of the lower self. The idea of self-importance is the enemy of the spiritual experience. What is important is the whole. And each being, each object, each particle of creation, is a manifestation of that wholeness, that undifferentiated beingness.

So when we can truly say, 'For the good of all, let it be so', then we will have died in the little self, and been born into the greater awareness of wholeness. The little self carries on. It has a function. But the attention is no longer focussed on it. The attention is on the whole, the essence. In this way, great harmony is brought into being. The essence is supremely powerful, supremely merciful, supremely bountiful, and supremely intelligent. The essence, the unmanifested matrix, loves all, is all.

Just as our own body is composed of organs, we are the organs of the whole. In the same way as cells that lose their sense of place and purpose within the body become a cancer, so does unbridled individuality become a cancer within the greater consciousness. It is a disruption of the great music, the great harmony. And leads to many of the problems that the world today finds itself confronted with.

So firstly, you may as well pretend to love. It will help to loosen your preciousness. Then strip away the possessions of ego. The ascetics thought they could find God by giving away all their possessions. This is pointless unless it helps them also give away the precious possessions of the ego, our feelings, our thoughts, our dreams, our sense of importance, our desire to live forever. When these precious possessions are discarded, then what is left? We find that when ego has nothing left to grip, it flies away, it is nothing. It itself can hardly be said to exist. It is an illusion, that we create, through gripping onto these inner possessions. Discard those possessions, and the ego is automatically gone. Yet it makes us angry to think of discarding our precious dreams, our precious sense of superiority or inferiority, our precious emotions of joy, love, sadness, loathing and so on, our precious thoughts, our precious opinions, our precious solutions to the problems of the world, the precious idea that we can make a difference to anything. These things, we might say, are who I am. That's just me. In fact they are nothing more than the grasping of the little self, layers of separation that enable one to say I am different, I exist, I am separate. Let them all go, and see what remains. It is nothing and something. It is the wholeness, the emptiness through which right action manifests spontaneously.

It can be done in a moment. Yet we insist on making a life long battle out of it, because that is the way of the little self, to want to struggle, and so confirm its separate existence. So carry on loving. Carry on sitting and watching. And one day you will get it. Or, it will get you. Ask for enlightenment sincerely, each morning. And practice the spontaneous manifestation of right action. It is as simple as the blowing of the wind, the flowing of the water, or the opening of a flower. It is natural.

With Love,

Sri Pompous.

Discourse the Second – The Breath of the Divine

“Many people make the mistake of thinking that God, the supreme mystery, the Divine essence is something outside of themselves. They pray to this being, seeing in their imagination a deity, an old man with a beard, perhaps a picture of Jesus, or some other personification. However this is making a fundamental mistake when it comes to a mature spirituality. This is because it is making a separation

between self and the Divine, dividing into separate parts that which is indivisible. It is partitioning off the Divine aspect of one's own nature, and saying that belongs over there, with God, not with me. But everywhere the old tales and truths speak of God dwelling in the heart, inside each of us. And this is getting closer to the truth, though it is still widely misunderstood.

The fact is that whatever we do, we seem to end up making some sort of image of God, the Supreme Mystery. Sometimes it's a personification, other times it's an abstract entity like omnipotent and all pervading. Sometimes it's a quality such as Spirit, with its collection of meanings and significance. The fact is though, that all these notions, concepts and names are human creations, whipped up by the human imagination. Behind them, just out of reach, lies the unknowable mystery of the Divine being. However we give these limited versions of the Divine tremendous power in our lives, and often, we forget that the Supreme Mystery lies behind them, enlivening them with its essence, and filling the mould that we have created. Therefore, when our prayers are answered, or some miracle occurs, we become convinced in the correctness of our image of God. We fail to remember that this God is a creation of our own making. It's like a sailing boat on the water. We hoist a sail, watch it fill with wind, which gives it form, and our boat sails along. We say, what a fine sail, see the nice shape, how nicely it propels our little boat. Thank you Oh beautiful sail. But we forget that the sail is simply catching the wind. The wind will fill any sail that we hoist, no matter the size or shape. We see another boat on the horizon. It has square sails, while ours are triangle shaped. We see how different our sails are. We see the different colors and designs painted on the sails. We see that those square sails are wrong for our little boat. But it's the same wind, never the less that fills them, and pushes along the other craft, and so, wisely, we recognize this and salute them with a friendly wave.

It's just the same with religions and spiritual beliefs. They are like sails we hoist in order to catch the breath of the Divine. Without a sail, we go nowhere. But it's not that the religion or the spiritual beliefs that we hold are better or worse than any one else's, or more or less true. They are just a means for catching the breath of God. This breath can be caught as easily by a Christian as a Moslem, a Buddhist or a Jew. And no matter the beliefs we hold, the breath will propel us forward on our way. So this is a more mature way to look at religions and spiritual beliefs, and how they can all be true, yet seem to hold different beliefs and recommend different practices.

The wise traveler knows that a sail is needed for their boat. They choose one ready made, or make one themselves, to suit their craft, their disposition and their sense of aesthetics. Once hoisted, the sail cannot help but catch the breath of the Divine, which forms into a visible shape determined by the nature of one's practices and beliefs. The shape is our own creation. The Spirit which enlivens it is part of the Supreme Mystery which we know as God. Just as the wind has no form, except that which we give to it, in harnessing it to our journey, neither has God any form, except that which we give to it. However, we must give God a form for the Divine Mysterious Spirit to be able to work in our lives. Let us not limit this form that we create for God in our mind and imagination. Let it be fluid. Let it grow to suit each stage of our journey. And let us always remember that the form, whether it is the scared heart of Jesus, the radiant compassionate Buddha, the blessed Virgin, or any other deity, is simply the form, a human creation, invigorated by the Divine mystery. Thus there is no need to become attached to a particular form. Nor is there any excuse to feel envious, superior or inferior when it comes to the beliefs of others.

This is all part of taking responsibility for your life.

With Love,

Sri Pompous.

Discourse the Third – Harnessing the Mind

“Fear and worry, are two of the biggest barriers one must overcome in order to truly live a spiritual life in this modern world. I so often hear people talking about how much they worry about so and so, or worry about the economy, or worry about the greenhouse effect, or worry about the degradation of the environment, or the poor quality of food these days, or pollution in the air. So many things to worry about. But it is a completely negative state of mind, which has no useful effect on the individual or the world at large. The spiritual individual is aware of all these things, including the negative actions or states of mind of friends and families. This awareness translates into appropriate action at the appropriate time. Such appropriate action may be saying something at a receptive moment, joining some kind of organization, sending a donation to a group devoted to some positive social benefit, separating the rubbish into compost, recyclables and hopeless garbage. Reducing packaging when shopping. When action is appropriate, the mind is focussed in the present moment, and the demands that it places upon one. The state of mind is very important. It should be a poised loving attention at all times. In actual fact, the quality of the consciousness is always changing. This quality is itself a creative force in the world, an effect on those around us. One can employ any number of methods to change the state of mind in each moment to a state of loving awareness. One can use prayer, invocations, chanting, whistling, affirmations, visualizations, postures, mudras and probably lots of other things I’ve forgotten as well. But the central principle of all of these methods is the observation that the mind responds to habit. If we establish the habit of loving awareness, then it becomes easier and easier. If we establish the habit of calm poise, it becomes easier and easier. Like a large heavy wheel, it takes a lot of effort to begin turning it. It moves so slowly at first. But if we keep making a concentrated effort, and don’t give up, slowly the wheel begins to turn faster and faster. Pretty soon, its momentum begins to assist us, and now that wheel is impossible to stop. Even if you slacken off for a while, the momentum keeps carrying you around. Just a little bit of effort will keep the wheel turning. It’s the same with the mind and loving awareness, or cheerful positivity, or full attention. At first it requires a lot of effort. But then as the habitual nature of the mind takes over, a small effort will keep the consciousness in place. And then we can build wheels within wheels. On top of our habitual loving awareness, can be built a relationship with the Divine will. This is like another wheel within the wheel. It too is hard to begin turning. But once the initial concerted effort gains momentum, it too can be maintained with a minimal effort. And we can then begin to turn the third wheel. We build on top of loving awareness, and a relationship with the Divine will. What exactly is it that’s built? The wheel within the wheel within the wheel? Perhaps we could call it spontaneous right action, perhaps we could call it God-identification. Enlightened ego-less action. Or inaction. And we could go on developing our consciousness in this way, building through the power of inter-supporting habits. And then we see that our true nature is released when the mind is channeled in these positive directions, and we realize that we are not the mind. Then what in fact are we? I can supply you with words, as have many others, and the only use they would be is if they started you developing your mental disciplines. Started you to take control of your perceptions, and see things in a positive light.

Worry and fear prevent this process from taking place, that leads to enlightenment. They are like the gravity that rolls the wheel down hill, faster and faster. However, this hill has no bottom. If you take my advice, every time you catch yourself worrying, or fearful, nip it in the bud. Make this prayer, “Divine Mystery, show me the truth of my situation, and fill my perceptions with your pure loving awareness.” Or chant three times the mantra VRIM. VRIM invokes that spiritual current that is perfect for you in this moment. Focus on the third eye or the heart center. It hardly matters what you do. Just do something that will help you to achieve loving awareness in this moment. Each subsequent time, that method will become more and more powerful. It is the way that the mind works. But do remember to give it a break every now and again, because the mind also likes change and variety. A regular break from a conscious practice allows it to move to a deeper level, and allows the mind to approach it again with renewed freshness and insight.

So the time to begin this process of building positivity and mental momentum is now. This momentum can take you much of the way to enlightenment. But not all the way. That journey must be continued on a road un-traveled by the mind. So they say, anyway, and why should I disbelieve it?

With Love,

Sri Pompous.



Practices.

This small selection of practices were some of Sri Pompous's favorites. They are perfectly safe practices, and beneficial no matter where you may be in your Spiritual development. I am sure that Sri Pompous would thoroughly endorse their dissemination in this way. Sri Pompous, of course, gave out many other practices to his students. Some of these were especially created for a particular individual, at a particular time. Others he gave out to all students at a particular phase of their unfoldment. For more advanced teachings, one is advised to contact the Academy of Happiness, or the spiritual path of your choice, where your progress can be monitored and aided by teachers familiar with the range of Spiritual Practices that can benefit you at each stage of your Spiritual Journey. A final note:- Sri Pompous used to say that a practice was not a static repetition, but a growing and developing means of relationship. Once you begin working with a practice, it has a habit of expanding, growing and changing. It leads us on a journey of discovery, in which we are forever changed for the better.

Robert Archer, June 25th, 2000, Toronto.



Gift Awareness.

This is a daily life practice. It consists of being aware of everything in our life that has come to us as a result of someone's gift. One way to do this is to say a blessing whenever you use a gift. For example, perhaps you got some nice glasses for your birthday. Whenever you drink out of them, silently say a little prayer, such as "A blessing to you Ralph. Thanks for your love, and this beautiful gift". Perhaps you pass by a picture on the wall that you got for your birthday once. Do the same thing, send a little blessing to the person who gave it to you. In this way, gifts become connections of love. And each time we come in contact with them, we send out love along those channels.

Breaking down the Categories.

This is another daily life practice. Most of us fall prey to the human tendency to categorize and pigeon hole the people that we meet, and to see them according to a limiting set of stereotypes. For example we see someone on the street, and we see only his skin color. Or we see a woman, and react a certain way. Or we see someone that's well dressed, and react a certain way. These reactions are all a form of limitation, a projection that perpetuates the boundaries that separate us from all our human brothers and sisters. This exercise seeks to loosen these stereotypes, to create a space for seeing each person's true essence. The way this is done is by making a point of noticing your reaction to people. If you find that you are responding to people of a particular color or ethnic group in a certain way, whenever you pass such a person on the street, say something like "A blessing to all people with glasses", if they were wearing glasses. Or "A blessing to all people wearing blue", if they had a blue shirt on. Or "A blessing to all people with crew-cuts", if they had a crew cut. In this way, the mind is trained to categorize in alternative ways to its usual stereotypes, and we begin to see people of all races and ethnic groups as having more in common than differences.

Calling the Hrum and the Vrim

This practice is a mantra practice that Sri Pompous taught. The Hrum, as taught by Sri Pompous, is the highest Spiritual Current in the created universe. As such it originates in the Supreme Deity Itself, and carries with it infinite love, infinite compassion and infinite wisdom. It also automatically adjusts itself to the intensity that will be of maximum benefit to the student at a particular time. For there is no upper limit to the Hrum, its intensity is boundless, as is the great creator. To call the Hrum into one, is a spiritual



practice that opens one to this boundless and infinite energy. It will work far reaching changes in one's life, and in one's conception of life, Spirit, and the Divine. To call in the Hrum, first quiet ones mind, and take several deep and slow breaths. Then say "I call the Hrum, the highest Spiritual current. May it flow into me and through me, at the intensity that's right for me, for my upliftment, and the good of all. " Then one chants "HHHHHRRRUMMMMMMMMMMMMM" nine times, in three groups of three. The first part of the chant, on the H's, sounds a bit like HERRRR, as it is drawn out. It starts out at a lower pitch, sliding up to the final note in the initial R. Have no doubt that this practice will open you slowly and surely to the highest Spiritual Current!

The Vrim is an aspect of the Hrum. It is that Spiritual Current which is perfectly suited to your current needs, consciousness and situation. It can come from any of the Spiritual sub-planes, and be composed of whatever vibrations and frequencies will be most beneficial to you in this moment, physically, emotionally, mentally, and Spiritually. The Vrim is invoked in similar way to the Hrum. First one becomes still, taking a few deep relaxing breaths. Then say "I call the Vrim, the spiritual current which is most beneficial to me at this time. May it flow into me and through me, for my upliftment and healing, for the good of all." Then one chants "VVRRRIMMMMMMMMMMMMM" in three groups of three. Unlike the Hrum chant, the Vrim chant is sung at a single pitch. This practice will surely bring a wonderful transformation into your life, and bring all kinds of beneficial changes, as long as you are open to change and growth.

The Hrum and the Vrim can be called at the same time. First call the Hrum. Then call the Vrim. Its a very simple practice but very powerful!