

EXCERPTS FROM
MY FLUORESCENT GOD

by Joe Guppy, M.A, LMHC

PRESENTED AT

Sacred Interruption:
The Ongoing Search for the Face
in Research, Psychotherapy and Practice
and Practice

Seattle University-- November 7-9, 2014
Levinas Seminar

DISCUSSANTS:

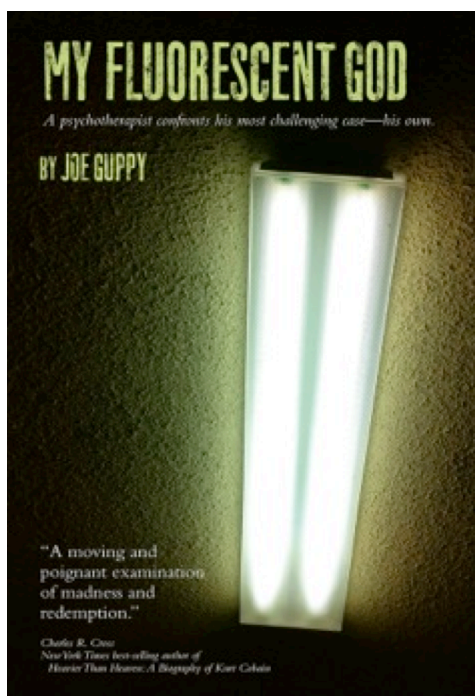
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Publisher’s Information Sheet

MY FLUORESCENT GOD

A psychotherapist confronts his most challenging case—his own.

by Joe Guppy



Joe Guppy’s life derailed in 1979. The 23-year-old was dealing with a bad breakup and existential angst, but it was a few stomach pills he took in Mexico that pushed him over the edge into paranoid psychosis... and straight into the mental ward of Seattle’s Providence Hospital or, as he perceived it, Hell. In the ensuing six months, he battled his real-life demons, jumped out a second-story window, and encountered God in a fluorescent light fixture. In this raw, often wryly comic memoir, Guppy invites readers into his haunted, 23-year-old head... and the experience is electrifying. Recreated from journal entries and the notes of mental-health professionals, the story of the author’s struggle to rebuild his sanity is a gripping spiritual and psychological adventure.

“Joe Guppy shows us what it is like to be a patient in a psychiatric unit and gives a three-dimensional and memorable portrait of the staff and patients he encounters there. This book is about suffering and confusion but it is far more than that. Guppy writes with quiet humor and grace and thereby transforms a painful time in his life into a story that we can all participate in and learn from, and even genuinely enjoy along the way. Moving and artful.”

—Steen Halling, PhD, Seattle University, author of *Intimacy, Transcendence, and Psychology*

MY FLUORESCENT GOD by Joe Guppy

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See the *My Fluorescent God* book trailer on Vimeo:

joeguppywriter.com or <http://vimeo.com/73720708>



Seattle native Joe Guppy, an award-winning writer and performer, worked in theater and television from 1980 to 1995. In 1996, he switched careers and trained to be a psychotherapist at Seattle University’s existential-phenomenological masters program. He was a community mental health counselor for seven years and currently has a private practice in Seattle, where he sees clients for issues such as addictions, anxiety and depression.

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ABSTRACT

“My Fluorescent God” by Joe Guppy
presentation and discussion for
Levinas Seminar 2014 at Seattle University

Joe Guppy will read selections from his recently published memoir about his experiences in 1979 as a 23-year-old mental patient. Excerpts will focus on the seminar theme of “Sacred Interruption: The Ongoing Search for the Face in Research, Psychotherapy and Practice.”

Joe’s isolated psychosis when hospitalized was often interrupted by the faces of mental health practitioners, some of whom were helpful and some of whom were not. Helpful practitioners often challenged Joe, forcing him to confront painful experiences. As Joe’s favorite psychiatric nurse put it: “We had to get to the heart of what was bothering you.”

Following the reading of the excerpts, three discussants from the psychology field will present responses to the memoir material, with a focus on Levinasian principles. This will be followed by a Q&A.

AUTHOR BIO

Seattle native Joe Guppy entered Seattle University’s existential-phenomenological master’s in psychotherapeutic psychology in 1996. After graduation, he was a community mental health counselor for seven years and currently has a private practice in Seattle where he sees clients for such issues as anxiety, depression, and addictions. This is his fourth presentation at Seattle U’s Levinas seminar. Prior to entering the psychotherapy field, Joe Guppy wrote and performed for theater and television in Seattle and Los Angeles. In 2014, his memoir, *My Fluorescent God*, was published. The book chronicles Joe’s experience as a hospitalized mental patient in Seattle in 1979 at age 23.

INTRO

I turned 23 in October of 1978, and found myself in the midst of a massive “quarter-life crisis.” I had gone through a really bad romantic break- up, my job seemed like a dead end, I had dad issues, I had God issues. I felt isolated.

In late January, 1979, the night before I returned home from a trip to Mexico to check out the possibility of teaching English there, I took a prescribed travel medication, which had a side effect called “toxic psychosis.” Knowing nothing about this side effect, and feeling the weight of all the stressors in my life, I was pushed over the edge. The story of my struggle to rebuild my sanity is the story of *My Fluorescent God*.

We join the story with my 2 a.m. return to Seattle from Mexico:

PAGE 21-- Fly

My older brother Ed picks me up at the airport and drops me off at my parents' house on Capitol Hill, where my car is parked. I am feeling extremely disoriented and paranoid and choose not to make the drive to my shared rental house in the north end. Instead, I decide to spend the night in one of my parents' spare bedrooms.

I can't sleep. I sit on the end of the bed and look out the window toward Volunteer Park, acres of green space a half block away. That was where Ed and I played on the ancient swing set, as big as an oil rig. That was where I played pickup soccer games after school in seventh grade. That was where I got stoned with my gang of high school friends in the early 1970s and joined the Beatles, Carlos Castaneda, and the Grateful Dead in the cosmic spiritual experiences of the times. One magical afternoon we discovered that if you hung in the crook of a tree just right, supporting yourself on your elbows, you could read the word "FLY" in the crisscrossing branches in front of you.

Tonight I realize that packs of wild dogs are gathering in the park and the right thing to do is to go there so that, snarling and leaping, they will tear me to pieces. But I don't have the courage to leave Mommy and Daddy's house.

Or maybe I'm already dead.

I go into the bathroom and get a twin-blade razor and cut at the fleshy part of my hand between my thumb and forefinger. With increasing pressure and panic I see that I cannot bleed. I *am* dead. I gouge deeper. Blood finally flows. I'm briefly comforted.

I lie awake on the bed, propped up on pillows, yearning for the courage to go and face the dogs. Finally, I doze.

I'm startled awake when the door opens with a click and a demon version of my mother, hunched, with an outstretched claw hand, enters the room. I gasp, then stifle the sound. The flesh of her face shows the shadows of her skull. A deep chill sweeps through my body. She croaks out something. I tell her I'll be down in a minute.

Both my parents are in the kitchen. Dad is making his breakfast.

"Good morning, Joseph," he says brightly.

A house rule: Don't talk to Dad before he's had his coffee. He's had his first cup.

Dad walks off and I lift the lid on the pan on the stove to see what he is cooking. I see a grotesquely misshapen wiener, a bloated Polish sausage, alien and twisted, split open, entrails spilling out, bubbling in the harsh fluorescent light. I let out a sound and put the lid back quickly.

In the past I've been stoned in my parents' presence, needing to "maintain." This is that times a thousand.

After several hours of this, I tell my mother I need to talk. We go upstairs to the study where my father sits, doing something responsible like paying bills.

I tell them I'm going crazy. Pretty soon they believe me. My father says we can call someone.

Soon we are pulling up in front of an outpatient mental health clinic on South Capitol Hill. From somewhere inside my confusion, I'm glad something is being done. As we walk up the pebbly concrete sidewalk, I look up and see that the building is constructed with a terrifying surrealistic geometry. Walls and sections impossibly overlap in shifting angles. It's painful to look at. Grinding, mechanical metal parts are chained and hanging randomly on the exterior.

We make our way through a narrow maze of humming yellow corridors as my head grinds with a humming yellow headache. I'm left alone in an office with a social worker. He shakes my hand and says his name is Mr. Wiener, like what Dad boiled up for breakfast. This seems to me like an impossible coincidence, a sign that I've passed into another dimension. Mr. Wiener has an enormous hooked beak, sunken cheeks, and he makes a loud gulping sound when he speaks that shakes the room. His Adam's apple careens up and down his loose turkey neck.

I tell Mr. Wiener I still think a lot about my old girlfriend, Laurie. I sob into the tissue he gives me. He looks at me kindly like things should be better now, but the way his eyes bug out and his skin wobbles makes me pray his face doesn't slip down the front of his skull.

TRANSITION TO "MIKE GUARD"

This leads to me being taken to the psyche ward at Providence hospital, just up the hill here. Now it's called Swedish Cherry Hill. The first night I am there, I try escape by jumping from the ledge outside a second story bathroom window, but my plans are subject to what Levinas might call a "sacred interruption."

PAGE 27-- Leap

I leap.

I land hard and start limping up the sidewalk. For a few seconds, it feels great to be free. I am locked on my goal—suicide—and my steely determination makes everything clean and simple, like the plain moonlight that shines on the sidewalk at my feet.

My ankle twinges. I might not make it to my old work building. Then I spot the hospital's tall brick smokestack, looming against the night sky, a metal ladder silhouetted up its side. It looks like a set for a 1930s gangster movie. Maybe I can jump from there. I increase my pace in that direction.

But someone is talking to me.

"Hey, hey..."

I look around. A short security guard is coming up behind me. He's a clean-cut, perky fellow with sandy hair.

"Hey, there..." he says.

I try to run, but pain shoots up my ankle and at most I can limp a bit faster. He's talking to his radio. The radio squawks back. He keeps pace but doesn't get too close.

"Say, do you need some help?" he asks.

"No, I can kill myself all on my own," I say.

"My name's Mike," he says, coming alongside. "Where are you going?"

"Are you a cop?" I ask. "Do you have a gun?"

He tells me no.

"Too bad, because you could shoot me. Mercy killing."

Another security guard shows up. Now that he's got backup, Mike is brave enough to grab my arm. His grip is firm but gentle.

"Let's go back to the hospital," he says.

"Fuckfuckfuck," I say.

"It looks like you hurt your ankle."

I let him wheel me around.

"Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck," I say.

He takes a peek at my hospital bracelet and starts calling me Joseph.

"They should take a look at that ankle, Joseph," he says.

"Fuck you, Mike," I say, but not in a harsh way.

We take a few more steps.

"I just want to kill myself," I say. "Those meds they gave me have really messed me up."

We walk into the hospital entrance. As Mike pushes the elevator button, he waves off the second guard. We go up in the elevator. My cursing and Mike's soothing tones echo inside our little metal box. I start talking about Hell and religion and God.

"Keep the faith," Mike says. "No matter what, God will always be there. He'll be there to look over your shoulder."

"Fuckfuckfuck," I say.

Mike brings me back to the ward, where I am given more drugs and put to bed.

PATRICIA PAGES:

The greatest interruption into my psychosis and depression came in the form of a psychiatric nurse, named Patricia, a woman whose compassionate and present face-to-face frequently demanded that I move out of isolation. Here is my first encounter with Patricia:

PAGE 30-- First Encounter

I come up out of a stupor and realize a nurse is sitting beside my bed. She looks like she's in her late thirties and has dull blonde curly hair. She says her name is Patricia. She has wide-set eyes, like an alien. They are blue and hold my attention. I start making the "terror bark" sound, a short staccato whimper.

"Is that your choice—to do that?" she asks.

The question is abrupt and puzzles me and shuts me up.

Patricia says they'd like to try me without the "posey." That's what she calls the leather belt around my waist. She asks me if I think I can handle it. I don't know what she means, but if she's planning to free me, I'm all for it. I nod.

She produces a key and unlocks the belt.

HERE ARE A FEW OTHER ENCOUNTERS WITH PATRICIA

PAGE 33—Patricia's Mission

Most of the staff are not to be trusted, but Patricia and Melba might be okay. Patricia hassles me constantly, but she doesn't try to trick me or play mind games.

For several days running Patricia makes it her mission to get me to tell her how I got here. At first I won't talk, but she insists. It's all a jumble, but finally I piece together the tale of the trip to Mexico, the pills, the exam at Harborview, the crazy weekend at my parents' house, going crazier and crazier the whole time.

Since Dr. Hardaway and most of the other nurses seem suspicious of everything I say, I look at Patricia and brave the question:

"Does that sound okay to you?"

She seems to believe my story.

PAGE 64—Deep Talks

Over the next couple of days, Patricia and I have some deep talks, mainly at her insistence.

“We need to get to the heart of what’s bothering you,” she says.

I tell her more about the breakup with Laurie. I confess that I feel guilty for betraying Laurie by sleeping with other girls when we were “on a break.” I feel guilty for seducing the other women by pretending I was interested in them, when I was pretty much just interested in sex.

My sins deserve great punishment, I think.

“I don’t want you to think of me as a terrible person,” I say to Patricia. She says she doesn’t.

I can’t believe I’m talking to a woman about this stuff, I think, but I am desperate.

PAGE 104 – A Tool to Structure Your Day:

As I slowly gain faith in my ability to make small, quiet choices, Patricia shows up with “a tool to structure your day.” She puts a sheet of paper on my hospital table, writes “Tentative Daily Schedule for Joe” across the top, and asks me to help her fill it in. Although I feel like I’m slogging through quicksand, I agree to wake up, dress, eat breakfast, and tidy my room by 8:30. Then the day stretches on with activities like piano practice, Occupational Therapy, and Community Meeting.

For four days, I obey Patricia’s schedule, with her checking on me several times a day. When Patricia has a few days off, I take them off, too. Upon her return, I sheepishly admit my lapse. But my growing ability to stay within the structure of the schedule boosts my confidence.

TRANSITION to LUNCH WITH PATRICIA

My adventure in the mental health system lasted about five months and by July 1979, I had regained my sanity. Planning to someday write about my experience, I took my reporter’s notebook and tape recorder to the hospital and interviewed my psychiatrist, Mike the security guard, and several psychiatric nurses.

This is a conversation I had with nurse Patricia, from Chapter 18 of *My Fluorescent God*.

PAGE 157—Lunch with Patricia

I haven’t seen Patricia since I left the hospital in early April and I’m excited to show her the sane version of me. We meet for lunch in the hospital cafeteria.... I give her the update on my successes with work, housing, friends, and going on a few dates with girls.

“That’s tremendous, wonderful,” she says.

“I never thought I would get back to the way I was before.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“What was I like in the hospital?”

“You were extremely fearful, suspicious, and guarded,” she says. “You were obviously hurting, but it wasn’t at all clear what was bothering you.”

I’m remembering what a mess I was.

“I know that I didn’t want to talk.”

“And you also did a lot of crappy intellectualization,” Patricia says. “But after your suicide attempt, I felt we had to cut to the heart of the matter and start rebuilding your confidence. You would get so angry when I would cut right through your long-winded explanations.”

It feels strange to recall the turmoil between us, sitting across from her at a normal lunch. I tell her I appreciate how hard she worked for me.

“Are you getting better at letting your hurts be known?” she asks.

“I think so. But I don’t interpret things as being against me anymore, the way I used to.”

I’m embarrassed to imagine Patricia’s memories of me at my worst. But it’s great to be talking as two sane adults.

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