A Brainstorm of Another Kind

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" - ... the greatest fallacy about suicide lies in the belief there is a single immediate answer - or perhaps combined answers - as to why the deed was done."

William Styron, *Darkness Visible. -, 4 Memoir of Madness*

On a Sunday in January, I received a message at my home from a judge. I knew immediately something was wrong. And something was. Terribly wrong. Judge George Heid of Tippecanoe County had been found shot, an apparent suicide. I remember the emotions I heard running through the judge's voice as we spoke - shock, disbelief, sadness, worry - but most of all, that incessant question - why?

Later that week I had many different people express many of the same emotions as they tried to come to grips with the terrible reality that a respected member of the legal family - a judge - had chosen to end his own life. Perhaps most poignant was the Tippecanoe County lawyer who agonized over what he failed to see, what he might have done had he looked "just a little closer, paid just a little more attention."

With the deadline for this piece so close, Terry and I started to think about what we might write that could not only make a small contribution to assist those friends and colleagues of Judge Heid who might read it, but that also might —just might— deter the next attorney or judge who needs help but thinks there is no where to turn. Let them know they are not alone. What came to us was to let one of your own colleagues speak to you about his experience with suicide.

Gary Bakke is a Wisconsin attorney who served as President of the State Bar of Wisconsin. I am a member of that Bar and proud to have had a leader such as Mr. Bakke who was willing to share his personal story in hopes of helping his fellows. Mr. Bakke's suicidal thoughts arose out of his depression and we know that depression can be one factor that increases one's risk for suicide. We at JLAP do not know whether Judge Heid suffered from depression, but what we do know is he lost his life, So Mr. Bakke's article is below, reprinted with permission. It speaks quite eloquently for itself. We sincerely hope you will take a few minutes to read it.

Susan Eisenhauer

My Experience with Depression: Brainstorm

By Gary L. Bakke

A few years ago, life was not going well for me, Despondency grew. I hatched a plan. Suicide is an awful burden for the survivors to carry, so I would disguise my demise as an accident. As a jogger, it was not unusual for me to go out after dark. That provided a perfect opportunity for a dark, rainy night. I would wait for a semi-truck coming down the long hill approaching town. Then I would "slip" and fall in front of the oncoming truck.

When should I do it? I needed to get ready.

Because this would all be an accident, it was not possible to leave a note, but my affairs could be in order. My will was obsolete. The will had been drafted before my wife and I adopted our two sons, so they were not mentioned. Thus, my estate, such as it is, was left to my wife and to my daughters from a former marriage. I would have to fix that before I could leave.

The need to fix my will was the knot at the end of my rope, and I knew it. Once that was untied, I could slip off the end at any time. I used that knot. Whenever I was motivated to fix my will, I would stop and remember that this piece of unfinished business was important to keep me here. It was preventing a spur-of-the-moment, irreversible decision.

A 'brainstorm' is what William Styron would have called it, but that word had been preempted to describe intellectual inspiration. "Melancholia" would have sufficed for him too, but even that word had been usurped by a bland noun used indifferently to describe an economic downturn and a rut in the ground. "Depression." What a wimp of a word to describe the raging maelstrom inside the head of a sufferer of this deadly disease.

Ninety percent of the population will never suffer from depression. The blues maybe, or down days, but not full-blown out-of-control, brainstorming, dangerous depression. This is written for the other 10 percent, and for those who love and care about them.

The Essence of Depression

For the majority, the illness will never be fully understood. In order to understand a foreign concept, we need to relate something in our own existence, our own history. Sadness? Insomnia? Confusion? Anger with self? Hopelessness? All are common symptoms of depression, and all are commonly experienced emotions for even healthy people. But they are not depression, and identifying with those emotions does not lead to an understanding of depression. This lack of a truly common experience creates a

huge barrier to an outsider's grasp of the essence of the illness.

Depression is a disorder of mood that is virtually indescribable to one who has not personally experienced it. It makes no rational sense to the emotionally healthy, so all attempts to explain it rationally are doomed to fall. Yet it is painfully and dangerously real.

The depressed person knows he or she is ill just as surely as does one suffering from influenza or arthritis. In fact, it is a common experience of those caught in the grip of a major depression to have an alter ego that can observe the irrational thoughts. But, because of the stigma attached to any illness of the brain, many who fully understand that they are ill attempt to deny or hide their condition. Thus, during the denial, the cauldron of organic soup simmers until it boils over.

From the outside, depression may appear to be a slowing of functions. In fact, the term "depression" implies a decrease in activity. The word and the external manifestations can be deceptive. Consider the automobile traveling 35 miles per hour down a country road on a January evening - a leisurely pace at best. Now peer inside at the driver struggling to maintain control in a raging blizzard. The snowflakes pound on the windshield like the flurry of thoughts on my window of consciousness - too fast to count or focus upon individually - and the overall mass obscuring the objective, to keep the car on the road and make it home safely. Depression is not necessarily slow or leisurely from the inside.

Confusion, failure of mental focus, lapse of memory, anxiety, obstinate determination, self-defeating behavior, panic, irrational thoughts, lack of joy, failure of speech, sleep disruption, agitation, unfocused dread, slowed responses, zero emotional energy, a blizzard of thoughts, self-loathing—all of which create an immense aching solitude, a feeling of cosmic loneliness. At this point many sufferers, like me, come face to face with Camus's fundamental question:

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."-Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

From a healthy perspective, I can now say, "been there and done that," but at the time I was suffering, it was impossible to put a light touch on it.

A Chemical Imbalance

Is depression an indication of weak character? Bad genes? Early childhood trauma? Moral decadence? No. Depression is the result of a chemical imbalance, no more and no less so than diabetes or other metabolic disorders. In some people, maybe 10 percent of the population, stress depletes serotonin and norepinephrine, the chemicals that are essential to the normal function of the brain's neurotransmitters. If one were truly of weak character, would Zoloft or Prozac rebuild the missing character strengths? Could anti-depressant chemicals erase the effects of childhood trauma? Again, no. It is really quite simple - chemicals replace missing chemicals.

Some people who have been in the mid-summer sun for 12 hours don't sunburn. Others may experience a serious burn in a short time. What's the difference? It's the same sun. Same sun, yes, but different individuals. So it is with stress - same stress - different individuals.

The Downward Spiral

When my personal downward spiral started, I consulted with a local counselor who probably saved my life. No, she didn't cure my depression (there is no "cure"), but she did care about me, and her personal caring was exceedingly important when I had concluded that no one cared. She helped me see that I was important to my children and others in my life. Her honest caring bought time for me and started my education into my own emotional makeup. Yet, I continued down the emotional vortex toward mental meltdown. My plan to solve it all was carefully considered. It was workable, and I could implement it whenever I was ready.

My knot at the end of my rope kept me on the planet but didn't accomplish much else. Relationships deteriorated. Trust was lost. Attorneys and other acquaintances started to discuss my condition with each other. Some were frightened, some angry, some confused, and many too involved in their own lives and problems to notice. But a few stayed with me. Their patience and understanding in the face of my behavior that could not be rationally understood saved me. They helped me get to a psychiatrist.

What did they see? How did they know I needed help? Totally irrational paranoia was probably the first clue for most. Later, as my condition continued to deteriorate, I left some specific clues. At one time, in a convulsion of emotional pain, I left the office saying that I did not know when or if I would be back. I now see that this was a subconscious cry for help.

I also attempted to ask for help directly. I had a hearing scheduled on a minor, post-judgment matter. A few days before the hearing, realizing that I was in emotional trouble, I asked the other attorney for an adjournment. I tried to be straight with him without saying that I was suffering a mental breakdown. I said that both my client and I were ready for the hearing and could be there, but that I personally needed some time and would he please accommodate my personal need. He wouldn't. Because of the history of my relationship with the other attorney, I thought that he would understand my request to be an urgent personal need and that, even if he didn't, I expected him to accommodate my personal need.

This weak direct call for help was absolutely all I could muster. The day that attorney dismissed my personal plea was the closest I came to sliding off the end of the rope. My reaction to it left no doubt in anyone's mind that I was in big trouble. By the time of the hearing, I had to admit my condition, I asked for a conference in chambers and told the judge and opposing counsel that I would do the best I could, but that

I might have to leave before the end of the proceeding. With the help of one of my partners and my legal assistant, I made it through that day - in fact, my client was 100 percent successful at the hearing. I have little doubt that if the result had been otherwise, I would not have survived the day.

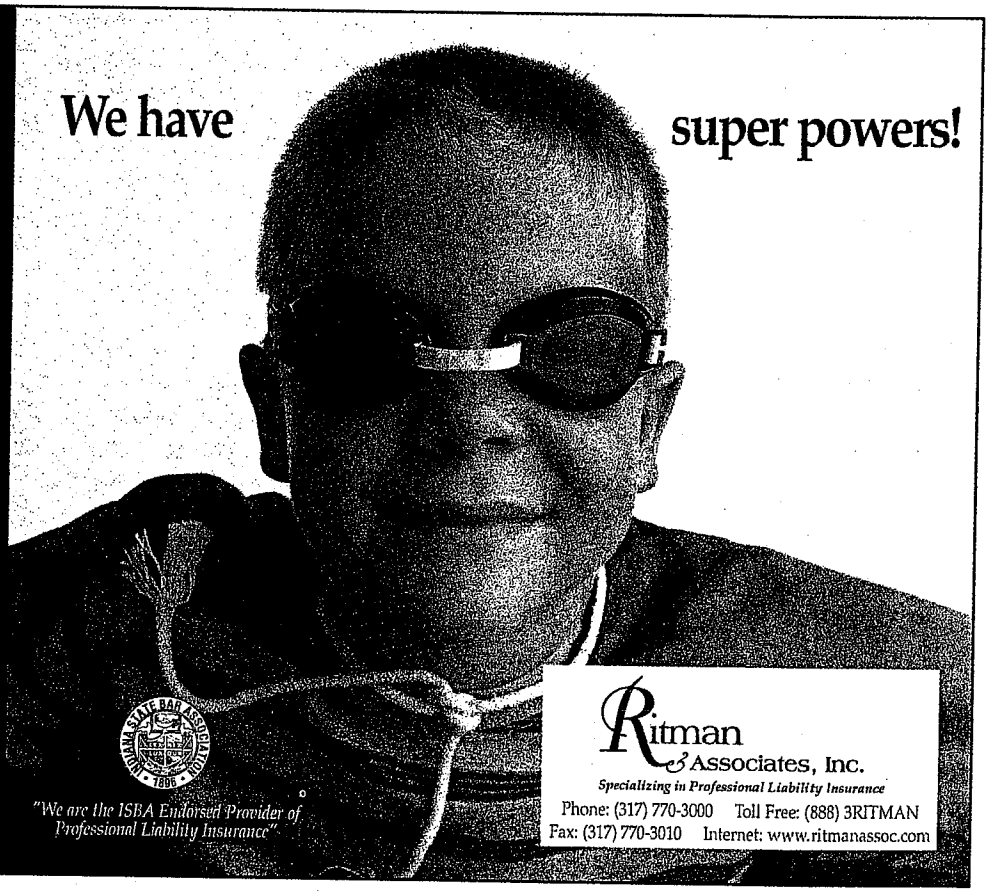
Epilogue

I was lucky. I had caring friends and understanding partners, some emotional insight, and an easily controlled chemical imbalance. For me, Zoloft was the magic bullet: 100 mg per day of the missing chemicals and life is good. Without it, I start down the same awful slide.

Are things perfect now? My emotional health is better than it has ever been, but there has been damage to my personal relationships. In the process of discussing this essay with friends and family, I scratched open some old wounds, and I was reminded how much I have hurt those who were close to me. It will never be the same, but, thankfully, in many ways it is much better. To the extent that there is permanent damage, it was caused by me behavior, not by my admission that I suffered from a serious emotional illness. Denial would have gained nothing but continued pain.

My story will not be identical to anyone else's, so this is not the definitive essay on depression. We are all unique, and depression manifests itself in strange and unpredictable ways. This is my own personal story. But if you see some of yourself or an associate or loved one in some of these passages, please know that there is help.

Depression is controllable.

HOW DID WE BEAT A 25 YEAR ENDORSED PROVIDER OUT OF A JOB?

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