

# **SUEDE SANDALS: SUICIDE PREVENTATIVES**

By

Ambrose Bierce III

NEWGRANGE PRESS



© Copyright 2014, Newgrange Press All rights reserved.



Both Saint Francis of Assisi and Father Junipero Serra wore sandals. To be sure, their sandals were not Birkenstocks; more along the line of *huaraches*, without the two-ply tire soles. Sandals worn by the saints and missionaries speak of humility. And many will argue that self-abnegation is not a virtue characteristic of suicides.

If you are a bipolar comedic, artistic, literary genius, or just a regular guy or girl, what steps can be taken to minimize the possibility that you will be found dangling from a leather belt?

Poor Robin Williams is very much in our minds and hearts. But ordinary folks untouched by fire can benefit

from what follows. Even Ralph Kramden,<sup>1</sup> the blue collar New York bus driver from the *Honeymooners* was considered bipolar.

On my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1987, before a diagnosis of bipolarity, my four children conspired to gift their 60s relic father with a pair of Birkenstocks. My previous birthday gift had been a black John Lennon T-Shirt with the rock star outlined in neon lines: “*All you need is love.*” They apparently argued amongst themselves whether the sandals should be of polished leather or suede; the choice was buff suede, appropriate shoes for a lawyer.

When I first tried them on, it occurred to me that if Hemingway had been wearing a pair, he would not have been able to pull the double-barreled shotgun trigger with his big toe. Interesting parallels such as these occur to bipolar folks.

There are two forms of the disease, I and II. And a subspecies of bipolar II disorder: cyclothymic disorder.

Bipolar I symptoms may include but are not limited to rapid mood cycling, manic behavior engaging in serial sexual relationships, spending sprees inverse to one’s financial means, and multiple hospitalizations. For a good description of that branch of the disease, read Kay Redfield Jamison’s *Touched With Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. Folks suffering from Bipolar I, as related by Dr. Jamison, may engage in suicidal behavior including serial attempts.

---

<sup>1</sup> There was an actual study done which proclaimed Kramden, as opposed to Jackie Gleason, who portrayed him, as ‘ragingly’ bi-polar.

Bipolar II individuals, on the other hand, experience a long period of high achievement and then deep depression including non-fatal suicidal ideations. Sufferers of the ‘black dog’ in political or literary history, include Winston Churchill and Lord Byron. In my own case, I would race merrily along, simultaneously serving on boards, writing poetry, litigating esoteric matters, and flying about the world pursuing various quixotic causes. Then I would crash. Unbelievably, the depressive periods were predictably cyclical: in my case, a 45 day ellipse with its own apogee and perigee; suicidal ideations usually arrived on or about the 21<sup>st</sup> day and lapsed by the 25<sup>th</sup>. I was not diagnosed with cyclothymic disorder until my 55<sup>th</sup> year. In the *Inferno*, Dante characterizes Hell as funnel-shaped. Bipolar II depressants spiral down like the incipient spin of an out of control training aircraft.

One becomes an expert at gauging in what *loggia*, as it were, of the funnel one happens to be lounging. When one has reached the ‘floor’ of the funnel, the soul freezing in ice, one is in real trouble.

So what remedies can be invoked to abate this suffering? Psychopharmacologists will tell you it is all chemical. That is only true to a degree. For while there is no doubt that suicides are serotonin-deprived, how they got there has much to do with individual behaviors. My homespun remedies are subjective; every case of manic-depressive behavior is unique, and the drivers of the disease proportionally different. But here is what I can offer:

***Behaviors:***

- Avoid the near occasion of stress. ‘Impossible’, you say. But it is really not necessary to serve on five boards of directors simultaneously. If you are an air

traffic controller and should have been a forest ranger, quit. If you are married to a virago (what would be the male equivalent – a viraga?) divorce her. A rule of thumb is: 8 hours work, 8 hours play, 8 hours sleep.

- Tests have shown that it is during our periods of sleep that the brain's magical chemical factory is active. Without sleep, the various chemicals that keep us level during our peak periods of stress are not fabricated. So sleep is best achieved by not eating for 4 hours before bedtime, engaging in some form of aerobics 12 to 14 hours before bedtime, – certainly not within 4 hours of bedtime. We can all understand the reasons for that.
- Aerobics build endorphins and other chemicals, which combat depression. Robin Williams fought his own depressive tendencies (whether he was Bipolar I or II is not for this writer to say – certainly, he exhibited unusual cyclothymic behaviors) by *cycling*. He had “more bicycles than I can count,” and generously gave high-end bicycles to his friends. Only one bicycle is needed – the trick is to ride it regularly, *in the mornings*.
- Eschew alcohol. Statistics show that as many as 60% of all Bipolars abuse drugs or alcohol. The motivation is simple: drugs or alcohol cool manic episodes the way water cools nuclear reactors. The downside is the depressant nature of the substance. The label of every psychotropic drug cautions against the use of alcohol. In my own case, I find I am able to drink a moderate amount of wine without successive depressive episodes. At the moment, I am alcohol free in an attempt to shed some weight.

- Avoid rampaging materiality. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* writes: “*The world says: You have needs -- satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more. This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder.*” In Mr. William’s case, one of the stressors was cash flow needs, at a time his creativity waned consistent with a diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. It must also be observed that the Parkinson’s disease would forever dampen Mr. William’s cycling stress inhibitor.
- Perhaps the most important tip of all – when suicidal ideations do come, *communicate them to someone who can help*. Failing in that, replace them with ideations of the *suffering a suicide inevitably creates in your loved ones – friends and family*. Put on the suede Birkenstocks and stare at them. Remember the loving faces of your children as they presented this unusual gift to their clearly crazed father. As one looks back, it was as though they had given me an old Volvo to be worn on the feet. It had both political and cultural ramifications. “*Distrust authority, my children.*” How do the messages endure when the messenger offs himself? The Blue Meanies will have won.

### ***External Solutions:***

- Ah, the magic of chemicals. Depression entails loss of appetite, loss of sleep, and loss of the joys of life. I love reading, but recall during depressive periods I could not get through the first page of a novel. Moreover, short term memory goes. I recall setting

forth from my hillside home in Atherton, California, for the local Shell Station, and ending up in Big Sur, wondering what I was doing there. There is, indeed, a ‘magical cocktail’ for everyone suffering from chemical imbalances. The trick is how to find it. One will not find it in a Star Wars Bar or over the counter. Lithium has been the tried and true alternative for Bipolar I sufferers. But when I tried Lithium, it almost killed me – it causes one to urinate like a racehorse and that interrupted my sleep patterns. At least, in my case, sleep and abatement of stress, are the key ingredients of my mental well being. I finally encountered a genius from the University of California, San Francisco, who prescribed:

- i. 900 mg of Neurontin (Gabapentin) which is a concoction developed by Pfizer as an anti-seizure medication. Miraculously, it works to cool the manic reaction in those suffering from Bipolar II disorders.
- ii. 350 mg of Wellbutrin (Bupropion) is an anti-depressant (the other side of the coin) developed by GlaxoSmithKline.
- iii. 25 mg Prozac (Fluoxetine) developed by Eli Lilly which is a ‘Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor’ (SSRI). I haven’t a clue what that means. But in my case, this very small dosage acts as a catalyst of some kind between the Neurontin and Wellbutrin.

One may suffer greatly at the hands of those practitioners below the genius level in sampling cocktail after cocktail until one achieves balance. It is not known how many different drugs were given Mr. Williams, but it is clear that none of the cocktails given him were effective.



It is a sad reality that the manic flights of fancy that allowed him to divergently think and express himself in multiple languages, voices, tongues, and tones were proximately caused by some form of bipolar disease. The same is true with his idol Jonathan Winters, who once told this author that Lithium laid waste to his comic creativity.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Therapy***

- Therapy of course can take many forms. Many question the efficacy of speaking to *anyone* about their problems. But consider this simple reality: a thorn in the paw of a lion festers until a creature like the humble mouse extracts it. When one expresses pain in *verbal* form (not on a computer – not in a chat room – not in any format that *preserves the pain like little glass shards in the sands of time*) to someone who *listens*, the expression bounces back in a different way, along a different vector. In other words, the sufferer is able to observe the *source* of his/her pain in a different way. It is like hitting a tennis ball against a wall; the wall returns the tennis ball at a different speed, along a different vector line, at a different height, causing the player to chase after it. To chase after it, and to adopt a different stroke to return it to the wall.
- The advantage of seeing a psychopharmacologist (an M.D. who is also a psychiatrist and has an expertise in psychotropic medications) is that such a specialist can tailor the ‘cocktail’ to the

---

<sup>2</sup> "I need that pain — whatever it is — to call upon it from time to time, no matter how bad it was," he says.

<http://www.npr.org/2011/07/30/138822853/jonathan-winters-reflects-on-a-lifetime-of-laughs>

symptomatology observed in session. Generalists who prescribe single prescriptions for complex psychological phenomena do no favor to their patients. Purchasing *any* over-the-counter sleep medications<sup>3</sup>, *ad nauseam*, can lead to worse problems: for example, when Valium is prescribed for a Bipolar II for sleep deprivation. Deadly.

- Try to engage in something that, historically, you experience as *fun*. If you are a fly fisherman, get out on the stream. If a diver, dive into the Blue Hole. If a reader, go back to the classics. There is much truth to be found there. Particularly in the Platonic dialogues. But that is another story.

There awaits a bright light at the top of the funnel of depression. When one survives, the very memory of its intense pain attunes one to the suffering of others, makes one more empathetic, if you will.

I took a look at my Birkenstocks the other day. They bear the stains of various street wars; the cork soles have been eaten away, perhaps by rodents. Strangely, their *souls* are intact. They still vibrate with *soul*, in the same way the Berkeley Campus vibrates when one enters through Sather Gate. Looking at their begrimed mottled majesty, one is reminded that it is only through intense suffering *of the soul* that great art is produced; as seen in the careers of Charlie Chaplin, Jonathan Winters, bus driver Kramden, and the much beloved and lamented Robin Williams.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Lunesta* is a particularly obnoxious ad: The Tinkerbelle's flights of fancy should remain imprisoned in Barrie's epic work. A rule of thumb: if a drug company needs to *advertise its products* to the mass media, avoid the products like the plague. As with lawyers, if they need to advertise, they probably are not worth the powder to blow them to hell.