

28 Days

by Gene Mason, Ph.D.

The atmosphere at CAB Health & Recovery Services and other holding facilities for people facing alcoholism and addiction that I have been in is full of fear. A "waiting for death" syndrome engulfs the people there. Call them patients, residents, inmates, or detainees, take your pick. There is one that reflects the perspective of your choosing. The experience is the same regardless of the label. I saw fear and dependence often during the six months I was in CAB in 1997 and 1998. I have seen it often when I return, as I do occasionally, to carry the message of hope to the 170 or so men held there.

I went there from jail, only a 40-day stay this time, and in the recovery unit at that. I was there for several charges of "larceny over \$250", and was being "surrendered" by my probation officer. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going away again for several years. They had given me loads of chances. I had over a dozen arrests and convictions for "larceny over \$250" during the two to three years preceding this latest arrest. When I went to court, I was prepared not to see the outside for three years.

When I was brought before the judge, my probation officer was nowhere to be found. So my lawyer began describing the reasons why I needed another chance to recover. All of a sudden, with a burst of energy, my probation officer came running into the courtroom. She was waving my court papers over her head and yelling out to the judge that I had had too many chances. She was full of fire. I couldn't take my eyes off of her and neither could the judge. My attorney noticed and whispered that I should look at the judge and not at her. I did. Then the judge stopped looking at her and looked at me. As he looked at me she began losing his attention. When she completed her lengthy oration, the judge said, "I disagree." I was shocked. "What could he be thinking?" I thought. "Not enough time? Here it comes. They're going to throw away the key this time," I said to myself.

The judge simply turned to me and said, "I'm going to give you another chance at treatment. Find a 28-day residential program and get in it within 10 days." The smallest feather could have toppled me in my boots. I was weak. The judge told me to go down to the Substance Abuse Clinic and get a plan. I could not believe it. The bailiff took the handcuffs and shackles off of my wrists and ankles. As I walked down to the clinic I was dizzy, very dizzy.

I knew the head of the clinic. He had interviewed me before to make a recommendation to the various judges I found myself in front of. I loved his spiritual presence. When I walked into his office, he recognized me. He stood. He asked me what I was there for. I have never done this before, but I simply said, "I think I'm here to thank God." He said, "Let's do it together." We stayed standing. He asked me to hold his hands. And we prayed.

After we finished, he said, "You'll find your way to a program. You won't need my help." I thought for sure that I needed his help, but I walked out and promised to stay in touch.

I had no idea where to go or to whom to talk. I walked toward Boston's Chinatown and the old "combat zone," the city's red light district. I knew about St. Francis House, that it was a day shelter, and I could get off the dangerous streets and figure out what to do.

When I got to St. Francis House I went upstairs to the day room and sat down. I needed to sit down. I was approached by a young man, a staff person, a half-hour or so later. He told me his name was Jim and asked if he could help me. I told him what had happened and that I wanted to enter Tewksbury State Hospital that I had been calling from jail and trying to get past the answering machines for a month, without success. Of course, no one can return your call when you are in jail. He said, "Come with me." I walked to his small office. He made a phone call, then turned to me and said that a van would pick me up at 1:00 PM the following day. God, I thought. It took him 10 seconds, and I couldn't get past the recording devices in a month's effort!

I found a bed in another shelter that evening. I was up at 5:00 AM and went to a Bible study group and prayed with them for an hour. Then I walked over to St. Francis House and anxiously awaited the arrival of the van. Jim gave me access to a telephone and I called the man at the Court's Substance Abuse Clinic. He knew I had been a fundraiser for non-profit organizations much of my life and asked if I wanted to help him start a spiritually-based halfway house when I finished the 28-day program at CAB. I couldn't believe that someone wanted me to help them do something right. Another first, I thought. Doors were opening for me everywhere I turned.

In jail I had surrendered. I had thrown in the towel. I wanted whatever God had in store for me. I was just putting one foot in front

of the other, and wonderful things were happening to me with no real struggle. My doubts were there, of course. But I accepted everything, no matter what it was. I had read in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous (the book of principles that guide AA) that this was the way things would happen when I took Steps One and Two of the Twelve Steps. (Step One: Admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. Step Two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.)

The van trip took longer than the 45 minutes I anticipated. It made lots of stops to pick up others. When we did arrive my doubts surfaced. It was the smell. I had been to a dozen mental hospitals over the past 25 years to see my brother. As I moved from state to state I would get him transferred so we could be near one another. This place smelled just like all of those places.

When they found out that I had a heart condition, they put me on First Floor East. This is the wing for the infirm, men over 50 years of age or with a significant medical condition. I walked into the room that held seven men. I struck up a few conversations. I figured that since I was going to be there for 28 days, I should get to know my roommates.

Red introduced himself. We chatted for a bit. Everyone seemed to know him and like him. I thought there was a lot of familiarity among the men. I asked Red how he liked the place. He replied that he had been there over a hundred times. I was stunned. Then I asked how long he stayed each time. "Well, I've been here 17 months so far this time." I didn't think anyone stayed there longer than 28 days.

Red introduced me to Chet. He had been there seven years.

Chet introduced me to Kenny. He was wearing a cape and a crown and lots of lipstick. He was so proud that he held the record: 27 years in the same room. I was ready to bail out! Panic was striking. My heart fluttered like a humming-bird's wings.

"Be calm, Gene," I told myself. "Maybe there is something here you don't understand quite yet." It was hard to be calm. My best thought was that if they can do it, I could do it.

As I later learned, these men were considered permanent residents. It was not a 28-day program for them. They stayed as long

as they wished. But it was not a 28-day program for me or for anyone else.

The 28-day notion was the way they got us to come there—"I can do 28 days standing on my head," I said to myself. But if they had told me my stay was indeterminate, I might not have been so grateful. But I was. After all, I was facing several years in jail.

When in jail, I had started to read the Bible daily. Since I thought I was going to be locked up for several years, I figured some self-improvement program would be in order. Now it looked like I might be able to actually read the entire Bible. I didn't, but I read a great deal and felt improved by it.

A few days into the CAB program, I realized that I didn't have much time to read. The lights had to be turned off early. Most of my roommates were asleep before 8:30 or 9:00 PM. I was restless and developed the habit of going down to the service desk and talking with a Tewksbury State Hospital service employee named Jerry. He was a huge man and had a huge, well-worn Bible. I asked him to suggest readings for me. He just loved to do that. He would say, "Go read Luke Chapter 19." I did. The Parable of the Gold Coins is a story about using the gifts that God has given us and making them multiply. In my condition, I didn't have anything to give away. So that night I prayed for love so I would have something to give away.

The next day I had so much love to give away I startled people. It was really noticeable. Other men would ask me why I smiled so thoroughly. They were amazed at something. I was overwhelmed.

That evening I went down to Jerry and told him what was happening. I asked him for some other passages to read. All of this was virtually incomprehensible for me. I had never experienced anything like this. Jerry readily gave me the citations. They were all about asking God for more love and being overwhelmed by it. Jesus told the man again that if he was overwhelmed by giving away God's love, he should ask for more love. And give it away! I could hardly believe it, but I was so overwhelmed that I did it again. And I was overwhelmed again.

By then I learned that no one knew when or to where he was going to be discharged. Most were waiting for beds to become available in halfway houses. I didn't care how long I stayed there. I was not in charge. I was safe because I was not in charge. For almost

20 years I had not been able to be safe from my addiction and myself. Now I was safe.

And I was busy. CAB really kept me focused. I went to five recovery meetings each day for six months. I was walking a couple of miles a day, around the building and around the building. I sang to myself when I was far enough away for no one to overhear.

I left CAB in May 1998. I thank God for CAB. They provided much needed stability. The staff provided a life-saving experience for me.

Red left CAB sober. As of the end of 2003, Chet and Kenny were still living at CAB. Jerry and his well-worn Bible were at the same post there. Jim is no longer a counselor at St. Francis House. He is working with his actor brother Mark Wahlberg. And while the monkey is not on my back, the circus is still in town.

References:

St Francis House <http://www.stfrancishouse.org>

CAB Health & Recovery Services <http://www.cabhealth.org/>