



Conrad Black Is Free

by Jonathan Aitken

CONRAD BLACK IS FREE. As the old hymn puts it: *The prisoner leaps to lose his chains. Hallelujah!* Such sentiments, if not in hymn-singing form, will surely be widely shared among *TAS* readers.

But while the mills of U.S. justice grind slowly toward what one hopes will ultimately be Black's complete vindication, this column would like to offer some fraternal thoughts on the spiritual journey of an ex-offender.

Conrad Black has already written movingly about the last moments of his exit from custody and his first taste of freedom:

A steady stream of well-wishers from all factions of the compound came to say their goodbyes....

most were brief and jovial, some were emotional and a few were quite heartrending....My departure was processed cordially. The personnel even conducted us to a back exit, through a padlocked gate, far from the media, and shook hands and waved as I slipped the bondage of the U.S. government. It had been 28 months and 18 days since I arrived. The ride back to Palm Beach was on the same roads over the same flat, scrubby landscape of strip malls and bungalows as the approach. It seemed more verdant and welcoming on the way back. The drive was contemplative and uneventful.

I was delighted to be back in my home, which the prosecutors had tried to seize for years. For the first time since I was last there, I enjoyed pristine quiet, free of loudspeakers, screamed argument, and the snoring of a hundred men. I had a glass of wine, and waited for Barbara, to celebrate the happiest of all wedding anniversaries.

From those words some interesting spiritual signals can be detected. For here, it seems, was a prisoner who had learned to love his neighbor, including the most unlovable of neighbors. He also appears to have become more grateful for small acts of kindness, more contemplative, more sensitive to the beauty of nature, and more appreciative of silence. He is perhaps more patient too as he sips his first glass of wine and waits lovingly for his wife.

I can relate to some similar emotions when I think back to my release from Her Majesty's Prison, Elmley, on January 8, 2000, after serving seven months inside for perjury. The stars I steered by on both sides of the jail wall were what I came to call my three F's—Friends, Family, and Faith. But they did not, at first, seem to be infallible navigational aids for a new life as an ex-convict.



Conrad Black, as I did, had a fortunate journey through prison. He related well to his fellow inmates, showed resilience under pressure, and became accepted by the community in his jail. But none of these positives are adequate preparation for the negatives that soon confront almost every released prisoner. Sleeping badly. Overreacting to slights and hurts. And discovering who your real friends are or are not.

High fliers like Black tend to accumulate a large flock of fair-weather friends. They melt away soon after the synthetic phase of temporary celebrity (or notoriety) fades from an ex-prisoner. So the welcome-back dinners in Palm Beach for Conrad and Barbara may be well attended. But the help-Conrad-with-his-problems party is likely to be conspicuous for its absentees.

Various forms of paranoia often surface in the early weeks after a prisoner's release. Why hasn't my good friend X returned my calls? Why isn't my old partner or banker delivering what he promised to deliver? Why are the lawyers on the other side of this or that problem being so impossibly hostile? Why are my media critics attacking with such unfair and untrue reporting? The only way of resolving such feelings of paranoia is to flush them down the loo and to start again on a diet of low expectations and humble pie.

Conrad Black may find that humble pie sticks in his gullet for some time. He is reported to be in a combative mood toward past tormentors. But such emotions of triumphalism or vengeance will soon turn to the ashes of bitterness. The best advice for avoiding such negativity is the old biblical adage *Turn the other cheek*.

None of this is easy. But the greatest struggles for an ex-prisoner are the internal battles of the soul. Few understood this better than the most celebrated jailbird of the Watergate saga, Charles W. Colson. In addition to his godly zeal in his post-conversion era, Colson also kept in mind the secular thought that his old political enemies would always be watching him in the hope that he would stumble or fall. Similar ill-wishers will be observing Conrad Black's post-prison journey.

SO THE QUESTIONS THAT WILL BE most frequently asked as his post-release dramas unfold are: Has Black been humbled by his experiences? Has he changed? Will he seek a completely fresh start using his considerable talents (not least as a

writer and communicator) to move into new fields of endeavor? The jury is out on all these questions. There are some signs that Black's eventual answers will be full of surprises.

So far he has shown courage and character on his travails. He has kept the love of his wife, Barbara. He has grown in his spiritual faith. He does have a small group of "hoops of steel" friends who may guide him well through the rocky road of reentry. So what the media prophesies about Conrad Black today could well turn out to be nonsense tomorrow.

Black particularly admired two friends in his life who may now be relevant to what he will do next. They were Jack Profumo and Richard Nixon.

The last time I attended a big party at the London home of Conrad and Barbara, the late Jack Profumo was there. The politician—who in the 1960s fell from grace for lying to Parliament about sharing a mistress, Christine Keeler, with a Russian naval attaché—looked a slightly frail and lonely figure, rather out of place among the glittering birds of high society paradise thronging the grand salons of Chateau Black. Jack spoke movingly of his years as a political and social pariah in London. Then he said wistfully: "I didn't get asked to parties like this, you know." He was clearly grateful for Conrad's kindness. It is a good bet that Conrad will now be thinking a great deal about Profumo's self-effacing road to rehabilitation.

As for Richard Nixon, perhaps the most remarkable icon of personal recovery in 20th-century history, he was the subject of biographies by both Black and myself. So I feel sure that somewhere in Nixon's post-resignation odyssey there are examples and role model paths that Black will seek to emulate. If that view is correct, neither revenge nor a triumphalist resurrection will last long on Conrad's agenda.

Instead, he may learn something from Nixon's inner journey of recovery, surprising himself and the world by seeking and finding peace at the center. And, like Nixon, he may enjoy, in old age, quoting the words of Sophocles: "Sometimes one has to wait until the evening to see how glorious the day has been." ❁

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