

Is there a Cinderella story at Butner prison?

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The other night I watched an hour-long television show on how Bernie Madoff is getting along.

He's been jailed in Butner, North Carolina's federal prison since the summer of 2009 for swindling his clients out of an estimated \$65 billion.

Gone are his multimillion-dollar estates, his collection of Philippe Patek wristwatches and his yacht named, "Bull." In their places are a shared cell, a broom he pushed on arrival for 14 cents an hour and a \$41 Timex.

(I think "Bull" was a reference to his make-believe investing style in the stock market -- in reality, he invested in no stocks or anything else -- rather than a cold-eyed description of his "business," which was not a business.)

Madoff had become increasingly rich and prominent from stolen money over three decades. Not one dollar had been honestly earned. While he will spend the rest of his life neither homeless nor hungry, it appears that he has fallen close to rock bottom.

So how are things going?

Butner is known as Camp Fluffy, because of its decent food, amenities and soft conditions. Madoff seems comfortable with his spare life and simple food—like mac and cheese and his favorite, Chicken of the Sea canned tuna. Unlike most prisoners, he's established connections across racial and other divisions. He doesn't appear to need to be a prison celebrity.

Madoff has no remorse for those he victimized, though he regrets the shame and pain he brought down on his family.

His refusal to snitch on those who helped run his Ponzi scheme has brought him respect from his fellow inmates. They acknowledge him as history's biggest con man.

Still, it is for him...life...in prison.

Humans, unlike other animals, seem to be able to adjust quickly to rapid changes in their social environments. We also seem to be able to live in all types of habitats, given time to figure out the ropes.

Madoff is serving a more-than-life sentence in a medium-security wing of a federal correctional complex where he is not expecting to be corrected. It's not hard time. He cooperates. He's not harassed by either

guards or inmates. He has reading material. He doesn't seek out much mental stimulation. He watches TV.

He told Barbara Walters that he feels "safe" in prison, that he has "people to talk to and no decisions to make..." that he has "nothing to think about because I am no longer in control of my own life." He's embraced being institutionalized, which is sensible in that he's not leaving, and he knows it.

Madoff's adaptation to prison started me thinking about how I would handle a sudden, irreversible change in circumstances. What if I went blind tomorrow? What if our assets and income disappeared without notice? What if I found myself in a concentration camp? What if I were sent to Butner for stealing \$65 billion without my wife's knowledge (Now that would be a trick!)?

Bad fortune is like a monster wave at the beach. Some you try to ride in; some you fight; some you duck under; and then there are those that you have to do the best you can with whatever you have—which is Madoff's strategy.

Before incarceration Madoff made an unserious attempt at suicide. Once inside, he adjusted to constricted, but-not-so-bad circumstances.

I wonder when new living conditions are so burdensome that giving up is the individual's most sensible choice?

No matter how terrible life was for prisoners of war, slave laborers or concentration-camp inmates, survival seemed to be worth the daily struggle as long as some credible hope of deliverance existed. Survival cheated the oppressor, and the hope for revenge could provide another motivation. Survival is a form of resistance, which, in turn, keeps body and soul patched together.

But if there's no hope, you either give up and end things, or you try to float along unobtrusively with "nothing to think about," as Madoff put it. That's being a passive zombie, which is what the sadistic guard in "Cool Hand Luke" wanted when he demanded: "You got your mind right, Luke?" "Yah. I got it right, boss."

A lot of Americans have ridden down the economic zip line since 2007. Millions of others feel shadows of ruin stalking them. Once down, reversing direction is usually not in the cards. The unemployment rate does not show this.

But life can turn on a dime, though, generally it turns on a dollar.

We hope that there's always one Cinderella in every Kingdom. We hope that good fortune will pick us out of the crowd.

A few *are* discovered by luck—like 16-year-old Lana Turner sitting quietly on a stool at a Hollywood soda fountain or Marilyn Monroe who took a few minutes from her job spraying paint in an armaments factory to pose for an Army photographer to boost troop morale.

Life's circumstances can sometimes take a giant leap up, or at least in a direction that seems up.

But just as Madoff has shown that there's an upside to a downside, I think the downsides of most upsides would bother me.

I would, for example, hate being famous and unable to walk down a city street without being pestered for an autograph that would be sold that evening on ebay. Paparazzi would drive me crazy, particularly the ones that took long-distance photos of me in the Mediterranean sunbathing topless.

I would not like to see my face on the covers of supermarket tabloids:

“SELTZER CAUGHT IN LOVE NEST
WITH UNNAMED WOMAN; CLAIMS
HE'S MARRIED TO HER.”

Might the liabilities of fame outweigh its benefits?

I think it would be equally unpalatable -- though the taste would be different -- to be married to a celebrity of that magnitude.

Denis Thatcher, husband of former Prime Minister Margaret, sponsored her career, put her through law school and then spent her glory years keeping his many offensive Tory prejudices to himself as much as possible, which wasn't that much.

Prince Philip, who once described himself as “nothing but a bloody amoeba,” married his third cousin, Queen Elizabeth, and became largely decorative.

And then there is Larry Fortensky, the chronic alcohol and drug abuser who objected to being, in his words, “Mr. Elizabeth Taylor.” Mr. Fortensky is not widely known for his early work in the construction trade.

Some folks are rich, but not famous.

A fair number of extremely wealthy people barricade themselves behind gates and hide out from the world. The spotlight of fame is the last thing they want. They spend money to buy anonymity.

If serious money -- say a billion or more -- arrived in the mail tomorrow, I, too, would use it to stay in the background. I would not buy a Senate seat, or a sports team or a wife who looked like Ivana Trump.

I would not have my name carved in granite over the newly funded **Curtis Seltzer School of Dreaded Thinking** at whichever university agreed to the biggest font size.

If fame and fortune were to befall me, if I became a Cinderfella, good taste as well as survival demand that I just keep my head down...and try to make the best of it.

Perhaps Uncle Bernie is pointing the way to a life free of worry and stress. And my first step should be to start stealing \$65 billion.

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