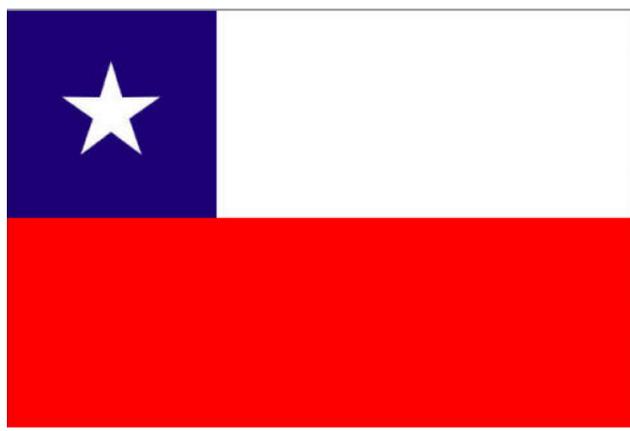


Chilean Miners: What now?

At almost 10pm Chilean time last night [October 13th, 2010], people around the world joined with the local mining community of Copiapo in Northern Chile to rejoice in the successful rescue of the last of 33 miners from deep below the earth. It was the 70th day since the collapse of the mine in which they worked.



As journalists swarmed around the emerging miners and their families, words of triumph beamed through various media outlets to countries across the planet. While the Santiago Times modestly announced: "Miners in Chile surface safe and sound, all 33," newspaper headlines and television soundbytes across the globe were less restrained. "The Miracle of San Jose" proclaimed the UK Telegraph, "Celebration as life trumps death in Chile's Camp Hope" announced Johannesburg's Star newspaper; "Last Man Out!" shouted The Australian; "Prayers, Tears and Jubilation" said The South China Morning Post. People everywhere were glued to their television or computer screens, breaths held as each miner appeared into the glare of the bright daylight, as well as the world spotlight.

As a pilot, I can picture what 2300 feet above the ground looks like. Having grown up in a mining family in a remote mining town in the middle of the Australian Outback, I can also picture 2300 feet deep into the earth. Not just the space "underground," but also the long journey in the cage down to 2300 feet and back up again. Having worked at one of Broken Hill's mines while studying at university, I have been privileged to "go down" on several occasions. I always ascended with mammoth appreciation for those who worked in the bowels of the earth every single day. For everyone who lives in mining towns, the potential for tragedy is an ever-present reality. Miners and their families live with the knowledge that accidents will happen. "If" is never the question, just "when."

The rhythm and life of the mine sets the rhythm and life of the town. In Broken Hill, where I spent my childhood, even the biological clocks of the town's citizens were dictated by the mine "whistle" – a loud, all-pervasive horn that heralded the changing shifts of the miners. As school students, if we were not awake by the 8am whistle signalling the start of the day shift, we would probably have to hustle to make it to school. At 3pm, when the afternoon shift began as the dazzling Outback sun baked everything in its wake, the whistle meant that relief from a long day at school was only a half an hour away. By the time the whistle blasted through the desert night air at 11pm for the night shift, lights would be out and all kids were supposed to be

sleeping tight in their beds. If the whistle blew at any other time of the day or night, especially if in a cadenced series of whistles, everybody in town braced for the worst. In schools, a hush would descend upon the classroom as we waited to find out who and what. If those whistles pierced the night while most of us were at home, the bush telegraph would instantly spring into action, the town's airwaves buzzing with what had happened and how we could help the affected families.

Because it was, like many mining towns, hundreds of miles from virtually anywhere, our mining town was characterised by an intense sense of community, an inherent commitment to looking after each other, especially those who had befallen a tragedy that could just as easily have happened to us. The level of connectedness amongst community members was therefore unusually strong, a characteristic that often had harsh social effects on anyone from "away" or outside the mining cliques. It was not until long after I left Broken Hill that I realised the uniqueness of the mining culture, how special the community spirit when deployed for the greater good. I can only imagine that the small remote Chilean mining town of Copiapo shared some of these same characteristics. I can only hope that the media frenzy around the miners' survival and rescue does not dilute the inherently healing aspects of their own community. Less than 24 hours after the miners were hospitalized for immediate first aid and observation, television networks boldly announced: "Now that everyone has been physically checked, officials are now more worried about the miners' mental health than physical health."

Jumping to conclusions about the psychological well being of these men is way premature, and can even contribute to distress. In our work with communities around the world who have experienced extreme hardship, including terror attacks, armed conflict and natural disasters, one of the key knowledges of Psychology Beyond Borders (PBB) is the inherent resilience of the human spirit and the human body. The research into responses in the aftermath of traumatic events shows definitively that most people are resilient in the face of disaster – they know that fear, horror, and intense emotion, are part of the experience. Psychosocial research also shows that while there is no universal response to a jolt like this, some people respond by retreating inward, some cry copiously, some use black humour, some get physically ill, some act out aggressively. These are normal responses to abnormal events. Most people move through these and find a "new normal" as they integrate their experience in the overall fabric of their own lives. For some of us, typically only a small percentage, this new normal is harder to achieve. We become "stuck" in the experience, with sustained distress reactions that may be best.

So let's not expect "trauma" of the Copiapo miners and their families. From all reports so far, the men and their families in Copiapo exemplify the innate quality of humans to endure and triumph over difficult conditions. Their actions in the face of exceptionally trying circumstances, are an example for us all.

What stands out for me with these men and those who love them, is how, as they adapted to their grim situation, they quickly and assertively assumed the primary role as co-authors of their own futures – what happened from one day the next (within the parameter of the situation in which they were thrust), how they endured their living conditions, how they communicated to the outside world, etc. These miners clearly played a very active role in authoring their own destinies. Specific examples abound: their establishing an organisational / social structure, scheduling their daily and nightly routines, their sequenced and strategic release of videos, notes; their organising of exercise activities; their setting aside time to pray and enact the rituals of worship that helped provide strength to those who believe. They made the best of a bad situation, and for that they deserve our awe and respect.

What stands out for me also is the undying patience of the families and local people who waited in hope while their fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, friends, endured both uncertainty and the unique challenges of living 2300 feet into the earth. I know what it is like to wait a few hours to see how the mining tragedy in our town played out, but to wait 70 days is unfathomable. Those waiting on the surface had to equally manage the uncertainty – amid a town that was no longer their own as rescuers and media pervaded their streets and their lives. They too deserve our awe and reverence.

They equally deserve our grace and our respect for privacy in the days, weeks and months ahead. Both miners and their families alike have a period of adjustment ahead. Their challenges will include newfound notoriety and even international celebrity status, as the world spotlight shines on their journeys to dissect every minute during and since... In mining towns the natural tendency to stick together, to help each other, to reach out to those in need, long after the media have gone away, are some of the most powerful healing recipes on the planet. While 2300 feet underground, the men utilised the insulation and isolation of their group to their advantage – strategically able to manage their messages. They no longer have that advantage.

As a world community, we can contribute to the adjustment of the Copiapo miners by allowing the Copiapo community members to continue to author their own journeys, to give them the space in their own surroundings to use the inherent skills and resources that have allowed them to triumph in the face of adversity, not just in the last two months, but in the entire history of their mining town.