CLAUTROPHOBIA, MOTHER’S WOMB, AND THE WISH TO SEE THE LIGHT

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Have you ever been stuck in an elevator waiting to be rescued by the building superintendent? Have you ever fought for breath in a windowless room? Imagine spending over two months trapped underground, deprived of sunlight with only vague prospects of ever coming up. Would the illusion of hope be enough to sustain you? If you were never a claustrophobic it is more than likely you would become one in the aftermath of captivity. Resilience notwithstanding, life can’t be easy to bear when the possibility of being buried alive is much more than a passing fantasy.

In the popular imagination underground spaces exert a combination of both attraction and repulsion. They evoke images of protective shelters, and their opposite, images of mysterious and menacing enclaves from which one wishes to escape. Caves are unconscious references to mother’s body, more precisely to the womb. Humans come into full being by leaving that cozy and insulated room. A slow process of differentiation, separation, and individuation follows. In sleep one has the chance to recreate approximations of that lost cocoon. In Morpheus’ hands the
dreamer restores that blessed state, residing –albeit for a few hours- in the protective domain of mother’s cave. But what if one can’t wake up, that is to say, be reborn the next morning to the light of the new day? What if there are no prospects of freeing oneself from such imposing or smothering protection. Would the birth need to be induced?

Under the above-mentioned conditions the womb/cave/claustro, lacking EXIT signs on site, is a captor that may foster panic attacks and an extreme form of anxiety called annihilating anxiety. If the birth canal (passageway and capsule) is obstructed, the fear of remaining forever in the suffocating envelope that constrains movement would redirect anxiety onto space, and claustrophobia may dominate the psychological profile.

A mine is the source of income for those 33 brave and courageous workers, but it is also the locus of one of the most frightful experience humans can phantom. It could be predicted that the majority of the 33 Chilean miners may develop disturbing symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some may be spared from them.

Although the long-term psychological sequelae of the 33 men may take a long time to assess, pertinent research suggest that among trauma survivors there is a group who, against all odds, defies expectations. These are individuals whose degree of
resilience, at least at a manifest level, is quite high. They seem to strive despite suffering horrific ordeals. It is well known that personal or financial success followed in the aftermath of numerous concentration camps survivors. What the fate of the 33 may be it is too early to predict. After the celebration and the media frenzy are over, and no more sunglasses are needed to face the brightness of reality, waves of despair may revive the wounds.

Moreover it is relevant to have in mind that family, friends, and co-workers, who so patiently gathered to wait on the surface at the entrance of the fated mine, are themselves not immune to the effects of the trauma suffered underneath by their love ones. Vicarious traumatization is a well-known phenomenon that affects all who in one way or another are closely connected to traumatized individuals. Mental health professionals, trained to offer their expertise to the afflicted, may themselves be prone to fall under the radar of vicarious traumatization.

The late night news reported that the miners demanded to wait until the last man was lifted so they could be transferred together to the local hospital. After 69 days together they seemed to have cemented bonds that may last their entire lives. Entering alone into the capsule that will bring them up to the surface had the potential to be in itself traumatic, like an abrupt separation from the maternal/cave. For 69 days the men must have relied in each
other for emotional support. The day has finally arrived when each must face, alone, his rebirth and the strong wish to see the light.