

Healing Hinemoa

I finally
appreciate
my own
company

The child psychiatrist and bestselling author opens up about family trauma and how she's learnt to be kind to herself.



WORDS *by* JUDY BAILEY

“Let’s start at the beginning,” I suggest.
“Now, there’s an interesting point,” Hinemoa replies, fixing me with those lively eyes of hers. “Where is the beginning? That’s what I’m interested in for the people I work with.”

For the beginning, she explains, is long before we’re born. Our beginnings lie in the paths of our ancestors. There is, she points out, an enormous body of research available now that reveals the impact of trauma and colonisation on previous generations can manifest in many ways, both physically and emotionally, on those who follow. Many of the troubled youths she sees in her practice are a case in point.


Dr Hinemoa Elder is one of our most respected forensic child psychiatrists. She writes psychiatric reports for the courts, as well as having a private practice, consulting to Starship children’s hospital and lecturing at the University of Auckland’s School of Medicine.

She’s also a member of an eye-watering number of boards and committees, among them the Mental Health Tribunal and Emerge Aotearoa, a charitable trust that works to support whānau physically and mentally, as well as helping achieve greater equity.

She is also an author. Her latest book, *Aroha: Māori Wisdom for a Contented Life Lived in Harmony with Our Planet* (Penguin Random House, rrp \$30), has become a bestseller. It is one of very few Kiwi books to receive a recommendation from Oprah Winfrey’s book club, an appointment that pretty much guarantees international success.

It is a collection of Māori whakatauki or proverbs containing wisdom of generations to help us lead healthy lives, in every sense of the word.

Hinemoa is the epitome of a wahine toa, a strong, brave Māori woman. She’s needed every bit of that strength and courage to navigate the many challenges life has thrown at her.

A woman with blonde hair and a tattoo on her chin is smiling and leaning against a large, gnarled tree trunk. She is wearing a white blazer and matching white trousers, with a brown top underneath. She is also wearing black high-heeled shoes. The background is a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

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Hinemoa was born on the West Coast of the United States, in San Diego, to a Māori mother from New Zealand’s Far North, Ina Bowman (Te Aupōuri, Ngāti Kuri, Te Rarawa and Ngapuhi descent), and a Pākehā father from Timaru, John Elder.

John, a physicist, was working at the prestigious Scripps Research Institute, one of the world’s leading biomedical research campuses, at the time. Ina, the first of her generation to go to

university, was teaching English at the University of Southern California.

They were both bright people. “Dad is an amazing man, a freak of nature, freakily brainy. He came from humble beginnings. His father was a barber in Timaru. His mother, a member of the temperance movement, would not allow alcohol in the house.”

Her grandfather was known for being a good listener. “In those days, going to the barber was almost a

therapy for men, a place for them to talk and download.”

Ina came from a farming background. “My mother had an extraordinary level of emotional intelligence. She was a vivacious, playful, fun person. She was a fantastic cook, something she passed to me and I’ve passed to my kids.

“Both my parents were incredibly nurturing. Manaakitanga was a big part of our home life.”

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It's no surprise that Hinemoa devoted the first chapter in *Aroha* to that cornerstone of the Māori world view.

Manaakitanga, she explains, is about the “respectful caring and protection of others”. It's about generosity and hospitality. There was a warm, welcoming home, where other people and cultures were respected.

“Growing up, my best friends were twins from India. Mum would invite their family over often to learn about their culture and their cooking.”

John and Ina raised Hinemoa to be a resilient child. “I was enthusiast from a young age, involved in dance, music and reading.” When the family moved to the UK, they set up home in Cambridge, where her younger brother Maru was born. By now, Ina had become a stay-at-home mum.

“She was way ahead of her time,” Hinemoa smiles. “I remember the other mothers would pick up their kids from school armed with sweet treats, but mine always came with carrot sticks. I wasn't thrilled then, but I'm incredibly grateful to her now.”

There were just two years between Hinemoa and Maru. They were firm friends. She recalls him playing the piano, organ and harpsichord, climbing trees, laughing and making a huge mess with toys in the bedroom when they were little. Memories are all she has of her treasured brother. He would later take his own life.

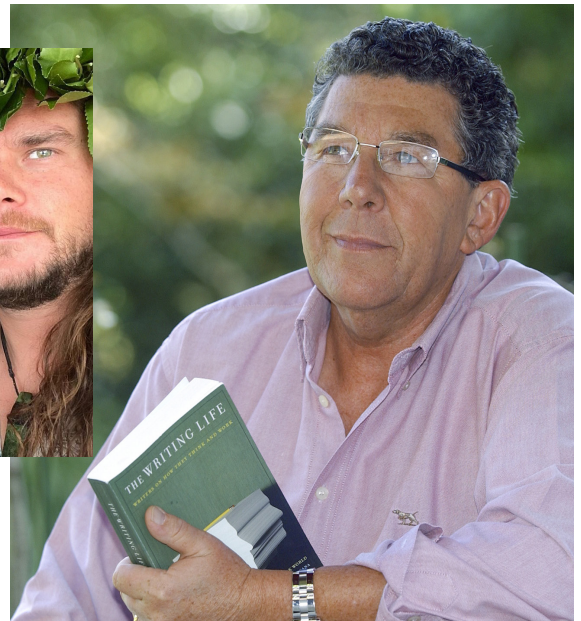
The family moved several times before finally returning to New Zealand when Hinemoa was 11. She settled in at Epsom Girls' Grammar in Auckland and was, she reckons, a pretty conscientious student.

“I loved school,” she tells. “Now school is much more stressful. There's enormous pressure from the internet. Social media enables you to take on a different persona. It allows people to hide who they are with little consequence.”

Hinemoa dropped out of her Bachelor of Arts course a year after enrolling and took herself off to



Children Millie and Reuben (above) bring much pride and joy to the child psychiatrist, who was once married to high-profile broadcaster Paul (right).



Europe to travel for the next five years. Her daughter Millie was born to a Greek father. The relationship wasn't to last. She would send photos home from Greece showing her with her partner.

“Mum would show them to a friend and ask, ‘Does she look happy?’” The reply was, “Not particularly.” But Hinemoa is understandably reluctant to traverse old wounds and tells me simply, “We all have our own sense of denial – reluctance to be real with ourselves.”

She talks of the pressure on women, how we're not allowed to be angry and those oft-quoted words, “You've made your bed, now you must lie in it.” Although she adds, “That never informed the way Mum treated me. In fact, she told me once, ‘You're lucky, darling – you'll be able to have a live-in lover.’”

Hinemoa remembers being slightly bemused by that, but she thinks her mother was just reflecting on the social norms of her time. “She talked of how women who were not married were treated as ‘dangerous’ in her time. Strong women needed taming and controlling. I think that dynamic is still there.”

Many of us will remember Hinemoa as the vivacious host of the afternoon children's programme *3.45 Live*. An old school friend, Jude Anaru, was working at TVNZ at the time and

suggested Hinemoa audition for the role. It was there, in the make-up room, that I first met her – and where she'd meet her former husband Paul Holmes, the father of her son Reuben.

At that stage, Paul was at the height of his fame as the host of the nightly current affairs show that bore his name. He was a force to be reckoned with – tight with those in power and a formidable, charming yet surprisingly vulnerable man.

He became immediately entranced by Hinemoa. He dithered about like a besotted teenager, wanting to know if he should ask her out. “Go for it,” we all said. They were married a year after Reuben's birth. Their very public union ended in separation after just five years and, later, divorce. Paul died of prostate cancer in 2013, aged 63.

“I'm sad that Paul passed away so young. He was never able to see the success that Millie and Reuben have become.” Millie is a social media influencer and involved in a collagen business, while Reuben is relishing his life as a teacher. Both are extremely close to their mum.

Hinemoa's own beloved mother died of breast cancer at just 54. Hinemoa was 26 and pregnant with Reuben. Thinking of others until the end, Ina told the family she wanted her body to be donated to science. It was this sacrifice on the part of her mother – an unusual move for Māori, given

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many believe in the sanctity of being buried with all parts of the body together – that spurred Hinemoa to begin her study of medicine.

She enrolled in 1993. “It was extremely hard work, but it was an incredible opportunity,” she says. “I was under extra scrutiny [because of her profile]. I needed to be mindful that there were those who would have been happy to see me fail.”

Hinemoa talks frankly about the racism she encountered at the university, the different expectations around Māori and the flippant comments she endured. She remembers being told, “You can educate us all about Māori health on the ward round. In the next two minutes, you can tell us everything we need to know.”

She adds, “Part of the Māori programme happened in the holidays. That instantly creates negativity: ‘If it weren’t for you lot, we wouldn’t have to be here in the holidays!’”

While she acknowledges there is now a real resurgence in interest and commitment to Māori culture, there is also a lot of pushback. “People say things like, ‘Te reo Māori is useless. Outside of New Zealand, it has no value, like Latin.’”

As an academic, she is well aware that Māori scholarship is often blatantly left out of discussions or presentations. “It’s unacceptable that people feel they can present in that way with no thorough overview of a body of knowledge. It astounds me that people forget indigenous stories.”

It is indigenous knowledge that underpins the work Hinemoa does with our most vulnerable youth. She specialises in tikanga approaches for those in her care. Tikanga is a Māori concept that uses practices and values from Māori knowledge.

“I see some of our most distressed young people. They are battle-weary and traumatised. I always begin with a karakia, a prayer. So many of these kids break down and cry at that point. They say, ‘No one’s ever done that for me before, Miss.’ I ask them, ‘Would you like to learn more about your language and where you’re



Even before her book became a bestseller, her work was recognised with an MNZM from Dame Patsy Reddy (right) in 2019, with her proud dad John by her side.



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from?” It’s always, ‘Yes, Miss.’

“Some of our most traumatised young people continue to receive trauma from the very places and institutions that are meant to protect them. They learn to expect that from adults. They don’t know how to process. You’ll find a lot of these kids misinterpret what is being said or done.

“There is robust research that shows you’re likely to see intergenerational trauma and the effects of colonisation rolling through the physiology of these kids. I see myself as a facilitator, a conduit for them to reconnect [with their culture and community] and take charge of their own healing. All those resources are inside them.”

Just as they were inside Hinemoa when she suffered from anxiety after Paul’s death and her very public struggle to help Millie through an addiction to meth. Now, she says, “I try to be kind to myself and not be too hard on myself, which I tend to do.”

She tries to keep weekends sacrosanct. “If I have to work, though,

that’s okay, too. I do karakia. Spending time with friends and whānau keeps me grounded. I lie on my shakti mat and do a 10-minute meditation a couple of days a week.”

She’s a regular at the gym for yoga and Pilates, as well as paddling in her local waka ama crew.

“I have learned to really appreciate my own company, and take time to process life and all the ups and downs. I talk to my mum. I cuddle my darling dog. I watch the manu [birds] and listen to their songs.”

Aroha is chock-full of wisdom and inspiration for all of us. One of my favourite whakataukī from Hinemoa’s beautiful book is, “Ruia taitea kia tū ko taikākā... Strip away the sapwood, the heartwood remains. Shed those outer layers and reveal your internal courage.” **AWW**

If you need help with your mental health, please call Lifeline on 0800 543 354 or text 4357. For the Suicide Crisis Helpline, dial 0508 TAUKTOKO. In an emergency, always call 111.

