

Hinehukapapa

— Dr Hinemoa Elder

Antarctica is female. And not just any female; a goddess of dreams, a shimmering icy queen. Hinehukapapa is her name.

Her white, pitiless silence so all-encompassing it is deafening. I have never heard so much quiet. It is as if her snow, her ice, her soft waves soak up all sound, forcing all of my senses to stretch themselves further, out beyond their familiar spheres, into a new realm of awareness.

Hinehukapapa makes confrontation inevitable. Standing, waiting in unwavering soundless magnificence. Her mountains, her rocky cliffs, her moonscapes. Her ancient, alien wisdom. She does not allow nonchalance or disregard. Somehow, her detachment drew us closer. We felt her pull. Her clear challenge to confront ourselves, to learn how to lead. In a world so profoundly in pain, so damaged and torn, her silence spoke volumes. The science is not enough; she helped us articulate that. Breathing her air, Hinehukapapa gave us the ultimate reality check.

It was 2019. I was in the realm of Hinehukapapa for three weeks. One of a hundred women in science on a leadership journey together. Homeward Bound: a 10-year plan for a thousand women in science to be put through our paces by Hinehukapapa herself, to pass through her icy fire. Our new relationship with her was the catalyst for the release of energy, the renewed determination to lead with female science, intuition and our own stories. ‘Mother Earth needs her daughters’ was our catch cry.

The harrowing start of our quest took us through the Drake Passage. Many of us spent those days lying down, unable to move. Drained, nauseated and, for some, vomiting. We emerged from our first test, having travelled through the vortex as if to another planet, with nowhere to hide and no distractions.

What better pilgrimage than this pristine female terrain, where Papatūānuku’s own offspring were waiting for us? Her unwavering eye of reckoning trained on us.

Hinehukapapa is a consummate minimalist. Her lands and waterways are stark and clear. Her domain holding our past, present and future in her timeless stare. The blue ice layers inviting us into their time-travel portal. A place of true wonderment.

For me, the journey back in time was real.

Hui te Rangiora, among other tūpuna, other ancestors, had been there centuries before. Their exploits are recorded in whakapapa. Watching the mesmerizing silken waters, I could feel the ripples across time from their journeys to ours.

Finger Mountain in the Upper Taylor Glacier, Dry Valleys, Antarctica. These geological formations look out of place in Antarctica, but they could be at home in the Grand Canyon in the United States.

