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## **Togetherness for Antarcticiness**

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Hannah Laeverenz Schlogelhofer, Stéphanie Langerock, et al.

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# ANTARCTICNESS

Inspirations and imaginaries



*Edited By Ilan Kelman*

**UCLPRESS**

**Antarcticness**



# Antarcticness

*Inspirations and imaginaries*

Edited by Ilan Kelman

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## **Togetherness for Antarcticness**

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Homeward Bound is a ground-breaking, global leadership training programme for women in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) with a close bond to Antarctica. Homeward Bound aims to heighten the influence and impact of women in making decisions that shape our planet by training a thousand women over ten years. As of December 2020, the Homeward Bound network comprised 410 women representing 45 nationalities. We are united in the knowledge that we are stronger together, we are able and willing to lead, and we are taking action with impact.

Each woman has her own story. At the time of writing, four cohorts of women in the Homeward Bound programme have travelled to Antarctica, and a fifth cohort are waiting to find out if this will be a reality for them. The programme includes a year of remote learning followed by a three-week Antarctic expedition. But what we discover and our relationship to Antarctica is entirely individual. In this chapter we could not hope to represent all experiences, but we aim to share the essence of our story through a blend of individual and shared memories, and a collective feeling of Antarcticness. We invite you to join us on our leadership journey and expedition to Antarctica.



## Embarking

What would send you to Antarctica? Maybe you are captivated by stories of early twentieth-century explorers, of walls of ice that rise up from blue waters, and rugged chocolate-brown mountains capped with ice dunes. Perhaps it's the stories of the creatures that capture your imagination – the penguins that huddle on their rocky nests until it's time to feed, then glide gracefully through the water, leap into the air and dive down again as they fish; the whales and dolphins that soar through blue waters in a world that is relatively untouched by humanity. Or maybe it's something else entirely – the yearning to connect with a group of like-minded individuals from around the world, eager to make a difference in a world that suffers from too much need and too much greed. Maybe it's the stillness inside you that speaks softly, saying: 'This is your time.'

We are the women of Homeward Bound. We are mothers, daughters, partners, sisters and friends. We are scientists, technologists, engineers, mathematicians and medics. We come from around the world to learn from each other, to empower each other, to support each other. Together, we want to lead a new way on this planet. As we gather in Ushuaia, Argentina to board a ship for Antarctica, we invite you to join us on our journey.

A trip to somewhere so far from our experience, our homes and our families is not easy, no matter where we start our journey – even in the twenty-first century. There is a fluttering in our stomachs as we sit at our departure gate. There are long hours of waiting, then running, passport lines and another flight. There are delays and some missed connections (see [Chapter 14](#)). But there is a conviction. This is where we need to be. Right here. Right now.

We have gathered from many corners of the world, and we are connected by science, conservation, activism and much more. We have all been navigating our lives and careers in a world built for men – often alone, struggling to balance work and family and the challenges of life. We have spent the past year learning from and about each other. Our programme has helped us to understand how we interact with others and the barriers to making our work visible in the world. We have reflected on how we hope to have an impact on the planet, and most importantly, how we are stronger together in the face of global challenges.

Beneath the still-snow-capped Patagonian peaks that stand above Ushuaia, we begin to open our hearts and minds to new ideas and new ways of thinking. We are about to board a ship together for three weeks



10.1 Sitting with togetherness. Photograph by Oli Sansom, 2016.

in Antarctica. We are gathered in a conference room at a hotel, with large picture windows overlooking the grey waters of the Beagle Channel. It feels like a hive. We are buzzing with new energy and anticipation of the icy world that awaits us.

Mother Nature, Pachamama, Mutter Natur, Moder Jord, Moeder natuur, Móðir jörð, Dame Nature, Madre Naturaleza, Papatūānuku, Parameshwari, Priroda and 大自然 (*da ziran*) are just some of the words we have to describe nature and its power. Each of these names has its own unique history and meaning, and some are strongly political. We learn that language is powerful, for leading and driving change. We choose how we use our language. It also poses challenges on the ship, as we are operating in English. This is a second, third or even fourth language for many participants. Some words cannot be translated. This reminds us of the importance of our diversity. If only this could be reflected in global leadership.

As with any journey among new friends, ground rules and insights about our group will help us build community. We consider our personal boundaries, our responsibility to each other, and how we will support each other on the journey. We move around the room sharing names and stories, and ultimately find ourselves shifting tables and chairs aside to sit on the floor, closer together, in solidarity and excitement (Figure 10.1). We take time to consider our strategies for navigating life, our visibility

(to ourselves and others), and what it might mean to be leaders, and to lead as women.

The fact is, we are all leaders. We have a lot to learn. We want to lead, to inspire, to connect and to mentor. Faced with the immensity of Antarctica, we are trying to find a new way forward. We hope Antarctica will take us there.

As individuals, we are always finding our way through life, and sometimes the path becomes clear in our scariest moments. As a global community, we are traversing a scary moment in time – a moment characterised by declining natural resources and climate change and increasing polarisation. It is curious that ‘polarisation’, the sharply opposing views of extreme groups, is so far from the unity and clarity the poles can create through Antarcticness and Arcticness. We need to function as a global community to find a way forward, and each of us has a role to play. We want to take Antarctica with us.

The moment has arrived to embark on the journey. Are we ready? What baggage will we be willing to shed as we cross the ocean and enter a different world? What will we leave behind, so something new can blossom in its place? All these things go through our minds as we enter the belly of the ship and settle into the container of our voyage.

## Crossing

We now leave Ushuaia behind us. The ship navigates along the Beagle Channel and out into the infamous Drake Passage. We venture south.

The Drake Passage is a point of convergence: a point of connections, crossovers and transitions. It is the body of water that reaches from Cape Horn in Chile, the southernmost tip of South America, to the South Shetland Islands at the northern point of the Antarctic Peninsula. It is the place where the Atlantic, Pacific and Southern Oceans meet. This place of in-betweens is the most treacherous part of our journey (Figure 10.2).

At this latitude, there is no land. Here, the currents that swirl around the Antarctic continent meet no barriers, meaning that this is considered one of the most challenging voyages a ship can make. What will we encounter? Some voyages are greeted by the relatively tame Drake Lake. Others must face the notorious Drake Shake, where waves can tower more than 10 metres high. Whatever hand we are dealt, the challenges of uncertainty and instability are ever present.

We are full of excitement and anticipation. Out here, there is no phone signal and no internet. We are learning to live at the pace Antarctica sets for



**10.2** A journey between sea and sky. Photograph by Stephanie Langerock, 2019.

us. Unlike the South Pole explorers, we are not here with the idea to conquer this vast continent. We are here to learn whatever it may teach us.

We pause and remember to trust in the journey. To be patient if insights don't happen quickly. Be present. Be open. Notice our feelings and thoughts. Give ourselves time to not know and embrace this sometimes uncomfortable feeling. Give ourselves space to breathe and truly take things in.

Today is a day of floating and drifting. Rocking and swaying. The boat seems to move more than the waves. While some of us stumble around the ship finding our sea legs, drowsy from seasickness medication, others stay in their cabins, hardly able to move, riding the waves. We are a point in the ocean. Looking out at the blue expanse stretching before, behind and around us, we feel both small and emboldened. The sense of our own smallness is a humbling experience.

During our crossing, conversations with fellow expeditioners help some of us recognise assumptions about ourselves and how we hold ourselves back. This is the beauty of being in a diverse group where a genuinely safe space has been established. We all see the world differently, but, we realise, Antarctica strips away the layers of our outer shell so we understand ourselves as we really are.

As the norms of human society fade, we tune into our inner voice. It can feel selfish to focus on yourself, but this time is important. Being clear

on your own sense of self, what you believe in and what is important to you, helps you to focus your two most precious resources: time and energy. Understanding yourself is also a strong base from which to recognise and value the diversity in others. This is at the heart of progressive, compassionate leadership.

We are now in the moment after the beginning. There is no turning back. The moment when the journey becomes real. The moment after the anticipation, when the real challenges of the journey start to reveal themselves. Together we support each other through any discomfort, knowing that challenge can reap rewards. We muster the courage to step forward into a world unknown to many of us. To forge a different path. We venture into this unknown to create a better world, a better way of being and thinking, a better way of leading. Together.

## Arriving

After two days and nights crossing the Drake Passage, we find ourselves on the upper deck of the MV *Ushuaia* for a breath of fresh air that bites our cheeks. The sky is milky blue and we let our gaze drift to the horizon, the edge between sky and Earth, the thin line between ocean and sky. At some point, while we were trying to sleep, we crossed the Southern Convergence Zone, another edge at the end of the world. This is the place where warm currents from the Southern Ocean encounter Antarctic waters. An oceanic weather front. A defining boundary between Antarctica and the rest of the world. The sharp shift in ocean temperatures changes the world – the air is dryer and colder, and the sky is endless on this clear day.

In a different life, we might have seen the Convergence in the bright light of day. We would have seen the change in the exploration and adventure. The steady hum of the ship's engine has become a comfort at this point.

We look out across the sea – and there it is! A break in the horizon. As the ship moves forward, it grows larger – our first iceberg! Soon there are gentoo penguins porpoising through the water, and it feels like another planet. Seeing our first penguin in Antarctic waters is a special moment on the journey. Everyone reacts differently. Daisy and Marina are standing at the bow of the ship. One is laughing and the other has tears glistening down her face. These two women in STEMM, so far from home, brought together by their separate experiences. Everyone always asks about the penguins, and now, here we are.

Every one of us arrives in Antarctica with a set of expectations. Some of us have come from icy winter climates, some of us from tropical cities. But we all have an idea of what we want to encounter. The thing is, now we are here, circling an iceberg the size of a tower block, the reality has chased away any expectations we had in mind. At the same time, other expectations fall away. Expectations of ourselves, our friends and family, our boss, our culture, our society. We wonder what Antarctica will ask of us.

## Exploring

Antarctica has been part of my imaginings for many years. And now, finally, I am here and we are here, as *Homeward Bound*. It is both we and I. For me to be part of Antarctica, and Antarctica to be part of me.

I see Ana and Uxua walking around the ship, fast, breathing and smiling. The snow falls so their footprints are tracked as they walk to the bow. There are still humpback whales breaching alongside. I look up, and see Susan on the bridge, chatting to the captain about the weather, and perhaps the universe, as that is something she knows about, having studied it deeply for many years. Gravitational waves, space, sea, wind. It all feels linked. I attempt to meditate outside in the cold. I don't want to let a single moment of this journey pass by unnoticed. I can't think of anything except how cold my fingers are. I can hardly bear to go inside. The desire to feel the weather is intense. A few days ago, Mel told me that adventure is one of her values. I identified mine confidently as community and justice. But now I realise, 'yes!' adventure is in me too. I didn't see it before.

If the conditions are right, the crew will ferry us ashore in inflatable boats. As the boat slides up a gravelly bank, we learn to swing our legs over the edge and step into the water, then up to the shore. All of our landings require emerging from the water, as though we are sea creatures tentatively setting foot in a place that feels new and strange. On many of our landings, we are greeted by the cacophony of penguin chatter. They pay no attention to us – intent on going about their business of scuttling down to the water to fish and taking care of their chicks. We stay out of their way on designated paths.

On Danco Island, we hike up a hill past a nesting colony of gentoo penguins. At the top of the island, the penguin chatter fades, and in the absence of the steady hum of our ship, we immerse ourselves in Antarctic silence – for a moment. There is some shuffling as we shed heavy parkas



**10.3** Antarctic silence, sunshine and beauty. Photograph by Betty Trummel, 2016.

in bright Antarctic summer sunshine and a temperature approaching 10°C. And then, in the moment when we hold our collective breath to soak in the silence and sunshine (Figure 10.3), there is a distant rumble. A low roar of ice crumbling and crashing. A few moments later, there is another. And then another. This is the sound of glaciers breaking – a normal occurrence in Antarctic summer, but an echo of climate change on the least inhabited continent on Earth.

Shore landings: time to investigate and learn, and take in pristine land and seascapes. Travelling in a little boat through such a surreal environment is indeed magical – every sight and sound magnified, the cold air feeling both biting and exhilarating.

We are surrounded by a panorama of steep cliffs gleaming in the light, or massive glaciers spilling right down to the sea. I hear the groaning and creaking of the glacial ice, an indication that at any moment crevasses will give way, and chunks of ice will topple into the sea. Mountain tops look like they are covered with folds of whipped cream or slathered with vanilla icing, thick and smooth.

I take time to meander along the shore and stop to sit on rocks or piles of snow. Gulls and terns glide overhead. ‘Bergy bits’ drift by. Penguins gallivant in and out of the water (Figure 10.4), their quirky



**10.4** An Adélie penguin's journey at Paulet Island. Photograph by Anne Charmantier, 2019.

style and movement on land so different from their smooth gliding and turning about in the water. Seals also greet us, seemingly awkward on land; their adaptations for adept movement in the ocean are key to survival.

I bend down to investigate life in a tide pool, marvelling at the tiny fish and crustaceans frantically darting about in the harsh environment here. I contemplate the importance of every single member of the complex Southern Ocean food web.

We are in a tiny ship and I often feel alone in the vast Southern Ocean. This amazing continent and the islands in the Antarctic Peninsula are ever changing, depending on the day, the light and the landing spot. It is all unique and extraordinary. I'm mesmerised by what I've seen each day of this voyage.

But things do not always go to plan. As we head south, down into the Antarctic Circle, it becomes clear there is too much sea ice to navigate the Gullet in Laubeuf Fjord, to reach Rothera, the British Antarctic Survey's research station. Ice reaches from one side of the Gullet to the other, and there is no apparent break, even this late in the season (Figure 10.5). We are faced with a choice. We can go, but we will have to endure an alternative path, around the outside of Adelaide Island in rough seas. Or we can turn





10.5 The Gullet. Photograph by Hannah Laeverenz Schlogelhofer, 2018.

back. Maybe this is a step too far outside our ability to cope, an edge we are unable to cross. The group splits in two. There is uncertainty, and heated discussion. Severe seasickness is a very real fear and danger, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to visit Rothera. Many of us long for the adventure, to take flight like albatrosses skimming through the sky, but others are grounded and fold their wings, believing the risk is too great. Overcoming fear takes real courage, but so does acceptance that sometimes we cannot have what we most desire. Finally, the decision is taken out of our hands and the captain announces we are going to Rothera. But it is a lesson. Sometimes we need to let go of what holds us back, as individuals and as a group (see [Chapter 6](#)). We reweave ourselves together and hold firmly.

## Returning

One of the last stops of our ship full of women leaders, known affectionately by us as ‘Ladyboat’, is Deception Island. This is a perfect place for a freezing swim in the Antarctic waters – the polar plunge. Deception Island is an active volcano in the South Shetland Islands. The centre of the volcano collapsed 10,000 years ago and has been flooded by the sea. The collapsed caldera has given the island a horseshoe shape, allowing whaling ships, scientists and tourists to find shelter. But things are not so calm under the surface. More than 20 eruptions occurred in the

past two centuries, with the most recent one in 1971. We are warned that if an eruption starts, the seals and birds will be the first to leave, so we should keep an eye on the wildlife. Upon setting foot on Deception Island, we are struck by the beautiful black sand beach and the most unusual sight of a black glacier in the background, made of ash-layered ice.

Experiencing a polar plunge in such a lunar landscape is exhilarating, but is also a challenge for the body, since the water is around 1°C. Despite all the anticipation and planning for the plunge, it is an experience of high tension, with extreme physical and emotional stress, and overall quite a lot of screaming.

Back on the boat, we reflect on how our individual and collective reactions to this exciting event are relevant for our leadership journey. When facing stress, a good leader should be self-aware, but also be aware of the context, and of others. A polar plunge can be seen as any challenge we face in our lives, a challenge that requires courage, but also requires that we are attentive to others. Facing the challenge makes us proud as a group – we overcome the obstacle together.

And then we face the Drake Passage again. It is the necessary transition before we can return back to ‘normal’ life, to our families and our jobs. Over the edge again. Amidst our suffering from what we feel is a very rough crossing, i.e. 11 metre high waves and a ship tipping at 32°, our expedition leader Monika rates it at six out of ten. She does add a much more important exclamation: ‘You are Antarcticans now!’, and for us, this takes a deep meaning.

We feel this encounter with Antarctica has changed us in so many ways. It has changed our selves, brought us new knowledge and awareness, and enhanced our connection to our planet and our ambition to protect it. And perhaps it has changed others as well while we were away. An alteration in the family routine, a frustration from the parent left behind, a shift of who was in charge.

We share guidance on how to anticipate the change of coming back. Take small steps in the change, don’t overwhelm yourself or others, go back to nature when you feel vulnerable, use love and humour (this book’s cover photo). And finally, write down an ‘elevator pitch’ about Antarctica, because you will be asked how it was, and you will be at loss to summarise in a few sentences this glowing, infinite experience. We hope Antarcticness is something everyone can share.

This transition period back to South America allows us to look back at the impostor syndrome we all shared before becoming Antarcticans. So many of us were convinced that Homeward Bound would not select us, that Antarctica would remain a dream. Yet here we are, braving the waves

coming back from Antarctica. We are now ambassadors set to protect this remote, fragile and immense beauty. And we will stay stubbornly optimistic to protect it, because we are stronger together.

Land is now in sight and we are struck by the fact that icebergs are already so far away. Only yesterday, I could close my eyes and reopen them to the peaceful Antarctic beauty, yet now they are a memory or a photograph. When I close my eyes, I can see my home and my family.

## Emerging

Going home to 'normal' life isn't always easy. Seeing our loved ones is wonderful, and so is finding the familiarity of our homes. Digesting everything we have experienced and learned can be hard. So is being confronted with sometimes hostile work environments. While we have all become ambassadors for Antarctica and we are determined to lead to protect it, we do it at our own pace and according to our path through life. Some jump right in to give presentations and keynotes from the day they return, while others need some time to cherish their experiences and wrap their heads around how to go about this. I am someone who needs to absorb the wonders, the beauty and the support of Antarctica and the sisterhood I felt on the ship first. Sometimes I was quite overwhelmed because I couldn't express the beauty and the magic of this experience while I really wanted to share it.

During a recent development conversation at work, I asked my head of department if they had noticed any differences since my return from Antarctica. The answer was 'Absolutely!' They said I had become a better version of myself and that I'm stepping up more regularly and more actively for the things I believe in. They could see I was really replying to Mother Nature's call for her daughters. I agree. I have become a better version of myself and I have become a more courageous leader. I am very much determined to keep giving Antarctica, Mother Nature and Mother Ocean the voice they deserve. A firm example of my determination is how I have been advocating for a green recovery since Covid-19 hit the world. I have invested a lot of time and energy to move this forward within our organisation and it has been completely worth it. While I was already leading and inspiring others before my participation in the Homeward Bound programme, I now own my leadership role.

It is very comforting to know that whenever we step up and we fall or fail, there is a group of women behind us to support us and to help us

back up. Stronger Together and Stubborn Optimism have become life mottos. We, as women, need to step up for our values and beliefs. The worldwide health and environmental crises we are currently facing require compassionate, authentic and strong leadership. Together we can and we will build a more sustainable and inclusive future. What better way is there than to do this together and through the bonds we forged with and within Antarctica?

## Imagining

We – the fifth Homeward Bound cohort – had planned to travel to Antarctica in November 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our voyage has been postponed indefinitely and Antarctica remains in the realm of our collective imagination.

Antarctica has a unique power to ignite our imagination. Thinking of Antarctica allows us to believe in a different world, in the road less travelled. The idea of heading south with a group of like-minded, diverse, truly global women in STEMM has given birth to a strong sense of togetherness in our group.

Even without having been there, Antarctica represents a special place for us. An Antarctic expedition would not just be the adventure of a lifetime, but a unique opportunity for an inward journey. Antarctica inspires us to imagine new ways of collectively leading towards a sustainable future, sparks new ideas to tackle today's environmental challenges, and creates a sought-after sense of belonging in a disparate world.

Antarctica is a symbol of scientific research, but a place where not so long ago women were not even allowed to go. Every woman who goes there is balancing the books. Adventuring there together would create a bond for life, stretching the idea of a professional network of women in science towards a heartfelt convergence of minds.

It is one of the last uninhabited places on Earth and is particularly vulnerable to human activities and climate change. As we imagine, we are acutely aware of Antarctica's need for urgent protection. Antarctica, with its vast wilderness, gives us the perspective needed to confront the immense challenges ahead of us.

Antarctic wildlife is elegant, humble, strong and relentless – and so are we. The currents of the Southern Ocean are magnificent, yet fierce and unforgiving. Dreaming of Antarctic waters reminds us how small we are, but how powerful our impact can be and how humans contribute to



**10.6** The art of ice. Photograph by Anne Charmantier, 2019.

its degradation and now to resurrection. As a team of women in STEM, we are united in our obligation to protect it, along with our entire planet.

Antarctica nourishes the child-like wonder that captivates our imagination. It promises adventure and discovery in exchange for our curiosity, determination and willingness to accept that we are not in control. It draws us in with a mysterious magic that reminds us: we are part of something larger. It represents peace and collaboration, people from around the world working together, putting science and purpose above geopolitical boundaries. Antarctica represents the expanse of human ingenuity and our incredible opportunity to change the world for better or worse – depending on our choices.

Antarctica is like its icebergs (Figure 10.6), revealing only a portion of its majesty above the water. Our Homeward Bound journey is similar to the iceberg, in that we uncover ourselves and each other in this amazing depth and ability. We see in Antarctica the permission and the insistence to be our raw, free, unconstrained and strong selves. By embracing Antarcticness, we expect to embrace the harmony and balance within us and we bring it into the world. Antarctica gives us the inspiration to imagine the bond holding us, and the strength to make the world a better place, together.