

# **"Navigating Currents of Change through Collective Leadership."**

**8<sup>th</sup> conference-**

## **Remarks by Robert Underwood**

**Buenas dihas todos hamyo, parehu ha' taotao tano', bisita, taotao otro tano'**

**Good morning to all of you, people of the land, visitors and people from other lands**

**Hafa Adai**

**I am thrilled to be invited to speak to you this morning. When I was told that it was going to be about 30 minutes, the thrill subsided pretty quickly. When I uncovered the theme of today's event "navigating currents of change" and "collective leadership," the thrill was gone.**

**Not because it isn't a thrilling topic, but because my sense of how to deal with metaphors, mixed or missed metaphors, oppositional concepts in front of an experienced group of advocates, communicators, change agents, agency leaders, NGO leadership, experienced regional leaders, national and federal agency workers is not only challenging but will inevitably appear incoherent.**

**How can I structure my thoughts to discuss navigating currents of change- are the currents going in the same direction; is my responsibility to take advantage of the currents or know when to fight them.**

**What are the currents of change? Which ones take priority? Which ones are stronger, perhaps irresistible?**

**Globalization**

**Loss of strength for indigenous cultures**

**Loss of individual autonomy in a complex society, rise of child abuse**

**Loosening of our relationship to truth**

**The impact of social media on our lives, our economy, our society**

**Loneliness and isolation**

**Digitization of our experience, the indigenization of our perspective—**

**Are we supposed to go with the flow? Are we going to fight the tide?**

**Are we going to navigate our way in between the currents that we don't like and ride the waves of the currents that we support? How do we do that?**

**What are the tools and knowledge required for this kind of navigation?**

**Do we have to take classes at the university, get a degree in social work, go home and talk to our grandparents, consult a cultural guru, go into the jungle for 40 days, learn how to live life minimally or enjoy life maximally, go vegan, take drugs, and don't take drugs**

**Is there a kind of navigator's license for this? Who has one out there? Is it given to you by a government agency, do you just proclaim that you have one? Can someone google how do we become a social current navigator? Let's see what we get:**

**I couldn't find social current navigator, but I did find social navigator—in my favorite encyclopedia, Wikipedia. This is what emerged:**

*Social navigation is a form of [social computing](#) introduced by Dourish and Chalmers in 1994. They defined it as when "movement from one item to another is provoked as an artefact of the activity of another or a group of others".<sup>[1]</sup> Social navigation exploits the knowledge and experience of peer users of information resources" to guide users in the information space.<sup>[2]</sup> With all of the digital information available both on the [World Wide Web](#) and from other sources, it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate and search efficiently.*

**If you fully understand this, you have navigated your currents much better than I could. It seems difficult to fully comprehend, but it does sound like a kind of meta-navigation which is carried out on the internet accompanied by a heavy dose of information technology dexterity. You can exploit the knowledge of the navigational experience of others to improve your own. It just goes to show that just when you think you have arrived at some unique terminology, somebody has already appropriated it.**

**There is also discussion of a Social Impact Navigator which originated in Germany and is now widely disseminated. It involves an analysis and the development of a process for determining how much impact a non-profit organization (NPO) has on society. It concerns approaches to societies, different communities and nations around the world. This is analyzing the results of navigating- but I don't know whether it gets at the matter of what constitutes the goal of navigating our way through currents of change. It sounds more procedural and definitional than charting a particular direction. We will analyze our journey to see if we are making progress. This seems different from identifying the destination of our journey, the point of the navigation, the matter of dealing with the currents.**

**This social impact navigator seems more directed at what we do collectively here as a collection of advocates operating outside of government and sometimes in opposition to social trends.**

**This is only one part of the title of this conference. The second part identifies the kind of leadership we need to engage in this journey, in this navigation.**

Is this a solitary activity? Not according to the theme- we are supposed to do this through collective leadership.

I am trying to conjure up the image of a traditional sailing canoe with a traditional leader that took decades to achieve. In the “po” ceremony from the Caroline Islands, these individual navigators are honored for their knowledge, dedication and clarity of purpose. I don’t know that they envision subjecting their voyages to some kind of collective decision-making. I don’t think they are being honored for their ability to lead conversations, organize focus groups or reach consensus. They could be in some indirect way. In any event, the buck has to stop somewhere and it stops with the navigator.

But this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we must behave according to the latest research.

Again, we read from theorists,

While “leadership” often connotes an image of a single heroic leader, many interesting developments in the field treat the concept as a dynamic process of exchange between several actors embedded in networks of relationships going beyond leader and follower. This idea of collective leadership challenges the traditional notions in which individuals are the source of leadership. This perspective embraces the idea that many individuals within a system may lead, or that groups, structures, and processes may exercise leadership to help networks advance toward a shared goal.

**Collective leadership describes the processes by which people come together to pursue change. Within these processes, participants jointly envision what the world should be, make sense of their experiences and interactions, and shape their decisions and actions to produce desired results.**

**And you can do this through a collective, not an individual leader. Individual leadership may not reflect the will of the people. Instead individual leadership may impede the will of the people to emerge.**

**This is a theory of leadership that is based on a belief system that the will of the people is something that can be discerned through conversation and discussion and conferences. I suppose that this could be true, but historically leadership is primarily an individual activity for good reasons. Authority to act must be exercised by a few and accountability has to be fixed on a few when the performance is lacking. Collective leadership, collective responsibility and collective accountability seem to all go together, but it is hard to see it in practice. Collective accountability is really not any kind of accountability.**

**We have tried collective systems of leadership in various circumstances and we have tried systems of government which proclaim that they are acting on behalf of a collective sometimes loosely called the people. I act not on behalf of a political party, myself or my gang, but I act on behalf of the people. I am wary of persons who claim to act on behalf of “the people.” This sometimes ends up badly, especially when millions are killed in the name of the people.**

**Historically, the examples abound from Stalinist gulags to Mao re-education camps and “back to the land” campaigns of a Pol Pot in Cambodia.**

**Of course this is the extreme version of how collective leadership can go wrong.**

**There is an extensive set of literature of how leadership emerges in societies that are flatter-like ours in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; societies in which influence can come from a wide variety of sources, in which the allocation of power and resources seems to be diffused and more horizontal than vertical. Politics appears to be just one source of influence and may not be the most significant. It certainly seems that way today when young people are disinclined to aspire to running for political office or even seek the security of government employment or bureaucratic power.**

**When I was younger, it was typical of young people to aspire to be Senators or Directors of some agency under ... you name the Governor. Today, young people don't seem to care about working for the government, the governor or the legislature, let alone being a Senator, Director or even Governor.**

**This is true across the U.S. In a 2015 Time article, a study conducted by Political science professors Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox asked more than 4,000 high school and college students if they would be interested in running for political office in America someday: 89% of them said “no.” This resulted in their book Running From Office. This will create a problem because the country's brightest start are willing to do anything but fill the 500,000 elected offices which are up for grabs in the U.S. every two years.**

**I frequently tell Rotary Clubs and organizations that are related to the business class of the island that the good news about UOG's students is that they no longer want to work for government. That was always the great fear. I tell them that the bad news is they don't want to work for them either. They want to work for themselves. They have an entrepreneurial view of life, its possibilities and challenges.**

**In this flatter world, where resources can be created, where access to information has been democratized in ways not thought possible, people can be highly individualistic. Perhaps they are just convincing themselves that something has fundamentally changed and that real power is still real power and only a handful have access to it. In any event, in the circumstances that we confront, in the midst of informational autonomous individuals tapping into different kinds of realities, collective leadership maybe more required. It certainly means that if you want something done, you better have the skills to engage in collective leadership. In this case you need more than authority and you need more than coercion. You need a kind of real leadership.**

## **Hallmarks of Collective Leadership:**

- Requires connecting people within diversity. You have to know how to operate in diverse situations with people who bring different experiences to social situations.
- Shapes the way audiences view their work and how they perceive themselves and others, and how they understand leadership itself. We have to be adroit at interpreting the world. This function of leadership is the most crucial and most easily misunderstood. Interpretive leadership explains and through the power of explanation, motivates to action. It doesn't coerce, because it doesn't need to.
- Commits to taking up leadership at all levels by people from all backgrounds, with varying perspectives and expertise. You can't be afraid or suspicious or immediately judgmental. You can judge, but you can't be judgmental.
- Can combine directive behaviors and collaborative approaches. This is a coherent set of carrots and sticks; incentives and disincentives; persuasion and coercion
- Aims to transgress boundaries that are often taken for granted. You have to cross your own comfort zones as well as encourage others to leave theirs.
- Knows how to be a follower as well as a leader.

**What does all that mean for the people gathered here today- you look like a collection of self-appointed advocates, appointed bureaucrats, self-aware activists, advocates for change, protectors of values, defenders of indigenous cultures, guardians of the environment- all of you fit one or more of these categories.**

**In our line of work- social action, work in "helping" government agencies like Public Health, Social Services, Education, advocacy through non-profit organizations, we use terms which are not generally understood in broader discussion. We form groups or organizations, originally informal and, with some success, they become formal groups. We argue, we cajole, we participate, and we appear in front of government bodies, write letters to the editor, participate in blogs, disseminate favorable information (as the truth) and attack unfavorable information (as lies or fake news). We are practicing a form of collective leadership through personal interaction almost every single day.**

**This is common in very large, complex societies with a history of community-based action, but not easily translatable to Pacific Island societies.**

**Most people, especially in small Pacific societies, see society as divided up into government as the source of authority and action, families as the organizer of day to day lives and meeting needs and dealing with crises, the external world (global society, large former and current colonial nations) as controlling all of our lives in unexplained ways, an economic sector and social/religious organizations which serve as adjuncts to whatever government cannot do or families are not capable of doing. Community comes in there somewhere, but it is usually an extension of families, religion or government. We sometimes refer to that space when it is inhabited by groups organized to solve some problem as civil society.**

Most of us here are part of that shadowy world which is beyond business, outside of government and external to families. The short-hand term that we sometimes use is that we are members of civil society- organized not to coerce (as we would if we were the government), not to make money (as business), not to survive (as families) but to persuade and make better. We come to the world of policy-making seeking to influence and not decide on policy. We go to businesses to get resources and support through a mixture of appeals to their profit motive or sense of purpose and values. We go to families to recruit soldiers and participants in our groups to act in civil society. We ask people to bring their spouses, their children, their cousins to meetings.

Michael Barendse defines “civil society” as the “arena of unforced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of social spaces, actors and institutional forms.” When you get down to it, it is the part of our social life which is not bound by tradition (as in families), profit and loss (as in the economy) or authority (as in government). Today, we inhabit that shadowy world and, in fact, we are promoting its advancement and its expansion through organizations like Payu-ta. We are not shadowy figures in the negative sense, but we are unseen actors and provocateurs in the positive sense.

Some people define this more simply as the “community.” John Gardner, the great community activist famously said, “We are all faced with great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems.” He believed in civil society, in community action, in voluntary groups coming together to solve community problems. Think about the importance of such groups around the world and the spirit that they create. We are inhabitants of that space that Gardner identified.

There are many studies about the efficacy of such efforts and it has historical roots in the analysis of social structures going back to the origins of sociology and in American history in de Tocqueville’s description of the importance of voluntary associations in American society. The voluntary associations were not just adjuncts to solve problems and raise issues in some additional way. Their very existence made the society more democratic. De Tocqueville said they were “necessary” to American democracy. They are certainly critical today. In American society, they are the necessary balance against political parties beholden to money, government contracts organized around profiteering, bureaucrats who lack the skills or the inclination to examine their own activities, societies suffering from a lack of fresh perspectives and innovative impulses.

On the international scale, we offer the hope of strengthening the democratic institutions of any society not by participating in more governmental agencies but by participating in more non-governmental organizations. It seems counter-intuitive and ironic but it is true that government is made stronger through non-governmental activity and democracy is best enhanced by transparency, by review, by a diversity of perspectives. This is why more and more international organizations ask for participants from civil society, ngo’s in international conferences as an important and necessary part of the conversation.

**This is a fundamental feature of encouraging positive change in traditional societies and also serves as a bulwark against the kind of social breakdown that has occurred in places like the Congo or Somalia. Advocacy is critical, advocacy is essential, advocacy is invigorating.**

**A collection of ngo's, npo's, advocacy groups meeting to design regional action and determining regional agendas can be a potent force for change. Or they can be just an opportunity to have meetings in different locations.**

**The jury is still out even after 8 years. The jury will always be out because there will always be new conditions and new opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems as Gardner described them.**

**In civil society, we have many things to contend with- unsympathetic bureaucrats, uncivil actors.**

**In civil society, we have to measure our advocacy to determine how insistent we should be, to know when to hold back and to know when to go full throttle**

**Advocacy is inherently messy, untidy, unclear, perhaps not measureable.**

**Like everything else in today's democratized information environment, we can victimize others with false news and be victimized ourselves with fake news. It puts at everyone's fingertips the old adage that nothing travels faster than bad news.**

**We also have to guard against manipulation of others and by others. Demonstrations of support organized by politicians or office holders are inherently questionable. This is not to say that political candidates or office holders are untrustworthy, but that they have tools available to the more unethical amongst them to offer pretend support in order to build a power base. This is exacerbated and strengthened by instantaneous information sharing. It was evident in the attempt to manipulate US elections by Russian operatives. This is to add to the usual manipulation by domestic Republican or Democrat operatives.**

**After the recent strikes against Syria by the U.S., there were spontaneous demonstrations by pro-Assad regime Syrians in the streets of Damascus. They were waving Syrian and Russian flags. Some reporters described these activities as being organized by the Ministry of Spontaneous Demonstrations.**

**Something similar happened in Guam during the past few months as we dealt with the financial crunch of the Government of Guam. We didn't blame ourselves. We blamed others. We blamed the Trump Tax Cuts imposed upon us whereas just last year we were like Trump's lap dog praising him for his tough stance against Kim Jung Un. Today, we know that Trump will meet Kim Jung Un before he meets any of us.**

**We had a hearse mysteriously appear in front of the Guam Legislature but no one really took credit for it. We heard about closures of services and the lack of resources that were going to sap our Government's services and possibly kill people at Guam Memorial Hospital. We really didn't know who to believe, we really didn't have very many speak truth to power, we suffered not through a shortage of cash and revenues, we experienced a shortage of trust and**

truth. The consequences of those events will live in our minds long after we balance our government check book.

On a micro-level, at an island-level, we were experiencing fake news, false facts, pretense, manipulation, maneuvering on a daily basis. Our response as individual citizens was muted and measured. We were wondering where we would end up if a particular side prevailed.

We did what most people do. We laid low, we hoped it would go away and we tended to say a pox on both of your houses as if all sides were equally culpable. They weren't. Some people misrepresented and manipulated and used all of the levers available to them. We weren't necessarily afraid, but we were concerned about where we would be after the dust settled. Would my position be jeopardized, will I not get support for my project, will I not be able to make an appointment to meet my favorite bureaucrat? We were left wondering.

We are still wondering that. It is not a good place to be.

Maybe this is the kind of collective leadership that is necessary to emerge from that part of our social environment labeled civil society. Maybe this is what is meant by the necessity for civil society to strengthen and support democratic impulses and the dissemination of truth.

If we cannot get justice, we should at least expect truth.

I started off by expressing my concern about what the title meant and then tried to give an analysis of civil society. I tried to critique some of it and yes I sometimes tire from hearing advocates from civil society who give the same arguments all of the time. But I am now concluding that without you, society cannot be kept honest, democratic or progressive. I salute your role, but you have to be self-aware about who you are as well and adhere to standards of truth.

Of course, I have been in your shoes from the first time I participated in demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and joined various organizations. I even started some. I have been a part of civil society on behalf of the peace movement, indigenous rights, the anti-nuclear movement, political status, worked against a slaughter house in my neighborhood in Baza Gardens and organized carnival booths, car washes and experienced the disappointment of failed meetings and the joy of expanded understandings.

I have held elective office; I have organized conferences which advocated unpopular positions. I have received foreign support for some of those activities. I have been described as a hooligan, a self-styled nationalist, a sell-out, an aloof academic, a populist politician. I have been a diligent student of social change and endeavored to participate and profit from those changes. I may go back to it after I retire as President of the University.

I can only conclude that truth is the great equalizer. It is the great disinfectant. It is the currency for democracy and progress. It is the objective of educational institutions like the University of Guam. It isn't the search for a great debate that should motivate University. It is the search for truth that should be the lodestar. In that search, as it is with civil society, truth can be a tough taskmaster.



**But I am ready to hear you, I am ready to add my voice and I am ready to search for more truth in all of our activities.**