

GUEST: “DR. TUSI” AVEGALIO

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What we bring to the table, to me, a very compelling cultural perspective. It acknowledges that substance is enduring, and that form is ephemeral, and knowing the difference.

Achieving a balance between the wisdom of the past and the knowledge of the future, with the director of a program at the University of Hawaii Shidler College of Business at Manoa, Dr. Failautusi Avegalio, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou, and welcome to Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. With a foot in both Western and Pacific Island cultures, our guest has been recognized nationally in economic business development. He is Dr. Failautusi Avegalio, better known as Dr. Tusi, at the UH Shidler College of Business. He runs the Pacific Business Center program with the college. Descended from a long line of Samoan chiefs, Dr. Tusi was raised in the coastal village of Leone in American Samoa in a family that included six other siblings. His father served in the U.S. Navy, and ran a successful agricultural business. His mother was a cultural practitioner who devoted her time to serving family members and supervising the family plantation during his father's military assignments. After graduating from high school, Dr. Tusi, following the family tradition of military service, was on his way to the Marine recruitment office to enlist, along with four friends. But a twist of fate intervened.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, it was the same day that the newspapers published the list of scholarship students. So, my name starting with an A, Avegalio, was the first on the list. So, my aunt brought it to my father's attention, and the family was absolutely sure I must be the smartest kid on the island, because I was named first on the list. They actually caught me just before I entered the recruiting office.

How interesting, how a life can change on timing.

So, he grabbed my hand, and for the first time, I was almost disobedient. But, when you got a big father with a big hand, I gave it a second thought and was obedient.

And he wanted you to go into education?

Wanted me to go to school; college.

Which became your livelihood.

Yes.

Your profession.

And so, two weeks later, my dad went with me. Went to Hawaii to meet family there, and then he saw me off in San Francisco. So, I was on the same flight as the other four. They went on to Vietnam, and I went to Kansas. Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia, Kansas. Our Commissioner of Education of Department of Interior at that time felt that small Midwestern schools would best be for acculturation purposes for students from the islands, and I'm glad I went there.

So, strong family values, but still culture shock.

Extreme culture shock. Especially with winter. But family values were very much the same. In fact, I sort of developed a tongue - in - cheek book called Coming of Age in Kansas. And it's just basically the cultural adjustments that coming from a tropical sea coastal village, going to the middle of Midwest, and interacting and working with people there. What amazed me was that many of the young Kansas boys had never been to Kansas City, or had never flown on an airplane. So, they had their own kind of insularity, their own kind of island, so we actually had a lot in common, and we certainly had a lot of fun.

So, they welcomed you, and you embraced them too?

Well, they didn't welcome me at first. They didn't know what ...

What to make of you.

They didn't know what I was. [CHUCKLE] It's the usual, He's too big to be a Mexican or an Indian, American Indian. He's too light - skinned to be Black, so they figured that might be one of the light - skinned Negros, or something of that nature. So, it was fun trying to get to know them, and they get to know me. And it usually comes around by playing music, playing the guitar. [CHUCKLE] Little cultural things that eventually got their curiosity to the point that it laid the foundation to some very enduring relationships.

Enduring, as in marriage.

Yeah; marriage and friendships. I married a young gal from Emporia, Kansas. She had no idea where American Samoa was. But I think what really helped make the transition to Kansas were the Hawaiians, the Hawaiian students that were there. They, more than anything else, helped me to transition successfully. Because they already had networks, they had relationships, and they were extremely popular. And so, I was very fortunate that they sort of took me under their wing, and ... rest is history.

And you never once considered leaving, saying, Oh, this is so different from what I'm used to?

No, because, again, being part of a collective culture, I think the shame would be unbearable.

You represented your community.

Yeah, because it wasn't just me that left.

But didn't your community want you to marry a local girl from your village?

Oh, yeah. Well, that came later. I was already gone, and it's a lot easier to make a decision when you're like, seven thousand miles away from the village.

[CHUCKLE]

How did that go over in Leone?

It didn't go over as well as I thought. My grandmother was very concerned that my wife was so skinny, and she was fearful that her health would not allow her to bear as many grandchildren as she would like to see. But I think in time, Linda became a very endearing part of the family, to the point where when we'd go anywhere, the first thing they asked for is, Well, where's Linda? [CHUCKLE] And I said, Hello? Oh; where's your wife? [CHUCKLE] So, yes. So, in many ways, going to Samoa enriched her life, and her life enriched my family's life and my people's, those that she had the occasion to interact with.

So, the people who decided about the match between a Samoan culture and the Midwestern Kansas setting were right.

Yes; in ways, yeah. And what also helped was that my dad, having served in the military, was able to keep the family and traditions at a distance to allow his son to make a decision. Dad knew me so well, and he was able to see without having to ask me where I wanted to go in this situation. And I think my mom attuned to me also, so they both, without having to sit down and draw it out, felt and sensed where my heart was. And knowing my heart better than most, they just supported it.

Failautusi Avegalio, or Tusi, returned to Leone in American Samoa to teach at a local high school while considering a career in law. With most of their teachers trained locally, the students were excited by the accomplishments of this native son who had returned home with a college degree. Finding his true calling, Tusi went on to pursue his education in Missouri and Utah, earning masters and doctorate degrees in educational administration. After earning his PhD, he proudly returned home. Sitting together under a breadfruit tree, his mother asked him to explain why he thought it was such a great achievement.

And I was thinking that this is too much, too complex, et cetera, for my mother to understand. And I sadly also included the fact that she only had two years of education in elementary school, thoroughly confusing the difference between knowledge and wisdom. I shared with her, because I love theory, so much of my emphasis was on looking at the theory of giants in the field. Mintzberg, Hertzberg, Adrius, Hertz and Blanshard, and political people like Montesquieu, Locke, and looking at organization, et cetera. She sort of just absorbed all that and listened quietly. And then, she told me to go feed the pigs. So, [CHUCKLE] I was thinking, Feed the pigs? I mean, that's what I used to do when I was a kid. Meanwhile, thinking to myself, Wow, the great value of my doctorate degree is

no higher than feeding pigs, and a little miffed as I left. But then, when I returned, my mom then asked me, questions that thoroughly put me in my place and forever endeared me to appreciating wisdom. She asked me if all the books that these men wrote were to be put in a large basket, how large the basket would be. And I said, It'd probably be as large as the village. [CHUCKLE] And I was thinking, Where is this going? And a *towanga* [PHONETIC] is a fibrous mesh that we pull from the Heliconia stem, and we use that to squeeze grated coconuts so we get the milk out of it. So, she said, If we got a *towanga* and you squeezed all of these books, what would you get? Privately, I was thinking, a lot of ink. But I really didn't know where she was going, so I said, I don't know. And she says, This what you'll get. You'll get respect, consideration, dignity, sensitivity and compassion, the very things that are needed to make men do the kinds of things that need to be done, especially if you're a leader. And I was thinking, Damn, she just encapsulated it. Essentially all the theories said the same thing, is to treat a human being humanely, followership and leadership can become that much more effective. And then, if you take those words and you squeeze them in the *towanga* again, what do you get? Then she really got me there. I said, I don't know. She said, You get *alofa*. And *alofa* means, in our language, love. And then, she said, How strange that you should go so far away to a place, at great expense to learn how to *alofa*. You could have learned that here at home in your family and among the village. She was just reminding me that, Don't be so full of yourself. [CHUCKLE]

Throughout her life, the mother of Failautusi Avegalio gently imparted to her children the values of the elders, their *alofa* and hopes for the future. Dr. Tusi's work honors his mother's vision that he would one day play a role in enhancing the quality of life for those of the Pacific Region. As the director of the University of Hawaii's Pacific Business Center program, he consults with and coordinates assistance to organizations that have business and economic development projects in the area. The Center's staff provides the technical assistance; Dr. Tusi's key role is bridging traditional values and Western thought.

What we bring to the table, to me, a very compelling cultural perspective. It acknowledges that substance is enduring, and that form is ephemeral, and knowing the difference. That by preserving the substance of the past, and then clothing it with the forms of the future, we would be able to achieve an enduring balance between the wisdom of the past and the knowledge of the future. My technical staff are very good in the areas of fiscal management, accounting, marketing, financing. What I bring to the table are the social, cultural, and the historical and the spiritual ones. It's weaving these two things together. My approach in the Pacific is very different from the person that might be approaching from a corporate business or a business from the mainland or from Europe. I think Bank of Hawaii might be the best example, just recently when American Samoa was hoping to get at least twelve months transition

period versus Bank of Hawaii wanting to withdraw within thirty days or ninety days. When a meeting was held at the last minute, the discussions initiated from the Samoa delegation dealt with issues of commonalities, common history, family, ancestors, wisdoms, things of that nature, and reminders that even though we may be separate on the surface, that we all connected in the deep. Now, I can imagine the Bank of Hawaii strategic consultant freaking out and says, What does this have to do with assets and projected profits, et cetera, things that are more business associated? But fortunately, the leader, CEO Peter Ho, as a boy grew up here, was born here. And it resonated. It resonated at that depth. They had reached an agreement that twelve months might be something that the Bank of Hawaii can certainly accommodate and would reconsider its original position. All the lawyers in the world could not have done what occurred there. And again, it's bringing the social, cultural, spiritual side, and then weaving it with the technical and the knowledge side to arrive at a place where there can be some mutual understanding, basic human decency and consideration. And I think it has worked out then, and I think it will continue to work for the future.

So, in a sense, you find partners and ways to get people moving together to enhance mutual lives. It's so tough to pick personal partners, business partners. How do you do that? How do you identify?

We have a term called *iike*. In Hawaiian, it's called *ike*. It means attunement, sensing. And that can only come about from experience, from maturity, and learning, and living wisdoms over a period of time. So, I lead with my senses, which is really peculiar, because my more quantitatively oriented colleagues are wondering, What are you talking about? But we always get there. And I need to be able to sit down with the various leaders, whoever they are, and sense them. Our ancestors used *iike* to navigate. So, they can sense not only the wind, the wave, the winds and the stars, but they can also feel. And I think that is what enabled them to achieve their destinations, and in a very small humble way, that I was able to tap into that to help me to achieve what goals that we were able to for our purposes.

Tapping into the wisdom of the ages did not come easily to Dr. Failautusi Avegalio. With the distractions of youth and exposure to many philosophies and models, he says it's taken a long time. Today, his life perspectives are well developed, and they begin with the belief that his ancestors have always held, that people and the universe are family.

We have two mothers. There's the birth mother, and there's your Earth mother. And in Samoa, it's called *Papa*. *Papa* is the name of the Earth mother. The burying of the afterbirth in a *ti* leaf - and *ti* leaf is a very spiritual plant, metaphorically symbolizes the connection of your umbilical cord to the Earth. So, my birth mother, and there's my Earth mother. And there's also your father, your human father, which is my dad, and *Tangaloa Langi*, which is the universe,

the stars in the heavens. When you have this sense of awareness of who your parents are, that gives you a sense of wholeness that you wouldn't have without it. What it also means is that the offspring, both your mothers and your fathers, are your siblings. They're your kin. If the Earth and the heavens are the parents of all living things, and they're also my parents, that means all living things and inanimates, stones, rocks, et cetera, are my relatives. So, that really didn't bear fruit in terms of its meaning until I was in college. One of my student friend's family owned a large ranch. They were clearing some land with huge trees, and they had this tractor knocking down the trees. And in fact, I couldn't even stay, I couldn't watch. But I'd been having those kind of feelings every time I see these kinds of things, and then it sort of all came together. It's like watching your kin being slaughtered or abused. The basis of nature is God; they're one and the same thing. You can't separate the two, and it's this separation thing that I had a real difficult time trying to reconcile. But what made a big difference for me is when I sat in on a lecture about Howard Gardner. Howard Gardner did these studies on human intelligence. What he pointed out is that there's more than one intelligence. Before, it just used to be either your IQ, and that had to do with problem - solving and quantitative thinking through mathematics. That there are other intelligences, and the one that just jumped out at me was attunement. It was an intelligence, people had an ability to sense and feel what is not readily apparent to others. And then this quantum mechanics things comes out with physics, that all things emanate rhythms or energies, and that there are animals and humans; they can sense these. And I said, Ah, that's what my grandfather meant was, we talk to the trees. He didn't talk, literally talk to the trees. If you're a healthy tree, you would emanate a different energy than if you're a sick tree, or if you're young or inappropriate. So, many of these kinds of attributes can actually now be validated or at least reaffirmed with modern science.

How do you develop attunement?

We develop it only if we focus on it. But we don't focus on it, because we have technology that does it for us. Let me give you an example. A mother has a child. The child is a block away, and falls off the stairs. Mama knows something happened to Baby. She said, Oh! And there are many incidences where people say, How did you know? Well, I just knew something was wrong. Another more common example. You've ever visited a place where it just felt really foreboding? And then, you go to another place, and nobody's there, but it felt so warm and inviting. An example for that for me is the church in Leone. When I go into that church, I have an incredible feeling of embrace. I now know why, but at the time, I didn't know. In the late 1800s, churches were built by crushing coral into lime, and then making sort of a cement, but there were no rebar, they used stones. But they ran out of stones when the walls were sort of halfway up. Gathered them from the river and the streams. And so, the only stones left were on what we call *kia* [PHONETIC]. *Kia*'s are like the *heiau*'s where *alii* are buried. So, Leone, if you go to that village, is noteworthy in the sense that

it has no *kia*'s. So, a very agonizing decision and a testimony to their faith had to be made. So, all the chiefs of the clans gathered, and the proposition was suggested that we have no stones, and the only stones remaining are the stones on the *kia* of each of our families. And these are our ancestors, these are the giants of our history and the past. So, each clan, I think very emotionally, made a decision that they're going to build, finish the church. And so, each one brought their stones, and completed the walls that now hold up the church. That explained to me why I felt the way I did, because the *kia*'s of my *alii* ancestors are in the walls of this building.

Do your cultural values get in the way of your job at all?

If you only have a foot in one world, reconciling dilemmas may be an impossible thing. But having a foot in both worlds, I can move back and forth very comfortably in both of these worlds. I'm a firm believer that trust begins with looking in another person's eyes, and feeling them, sensing them, observing their behavior. It has been a traditional practice of our traditional leaders. We sit and we look at each other, and we share food and drink. Sharing food and drink is so essential to sharing oneself. And you take it even further when you can invite them to your home. It's important for me to have them feel that I'm comfortable, that they are welcome to meet my grandchildren, my children, and my wife, and others in the family. But see how disarming it could be. When I can move then into my world, then I think I'm in a position where I can enhance a trusting relationship. In our traditional settings, before we engage or receive visiting dignitaries or chiefs from other villages, they do their homework. They check your genealogy and your history so that when the engagement actually occurs, there is a context in which pathways can then be extended out. And multiple pathways enables the guest to find which is the most comfortable to walk on. Once that one is identified, the others all collapse into that one. And then, we receive them that way.

Dr. Tusi says he's thankful for the collective guidance, wisdom, and sacrifices of his parents and extended family in his voyage through life. It's now his turn, an obligation to impart those Pacific lessons and his Western educational experience to be there for his four children and seven grandchildren, as they navigate toward the future. Thank you, Dr. Failautusi Avegalio - Dr. Tusi, director of the University of Hawaii's Pacific Business Center, for sharing your long story short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou, 'til next time. Aloha.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org.

Our people, we think in metaphors and we learn through stories. And because we're a navigator people, most of our wisdoms derive from the ocean. When the winds don't shift, adjust your sails. My favorite metaphor is the one that

deals with challenges. And it's about being bold, being courageous, being entrepreneurial. Only you can sense when it's time to turn into the wind and reach for shores yet untouched. When is your time? When do you turn into the wind? When do you adjust your sail? Like my mom said, anybody can hoist an anchor and unfurl a sail. You know how to do that, but it's knowing when to do it, and more important, why do you do it.