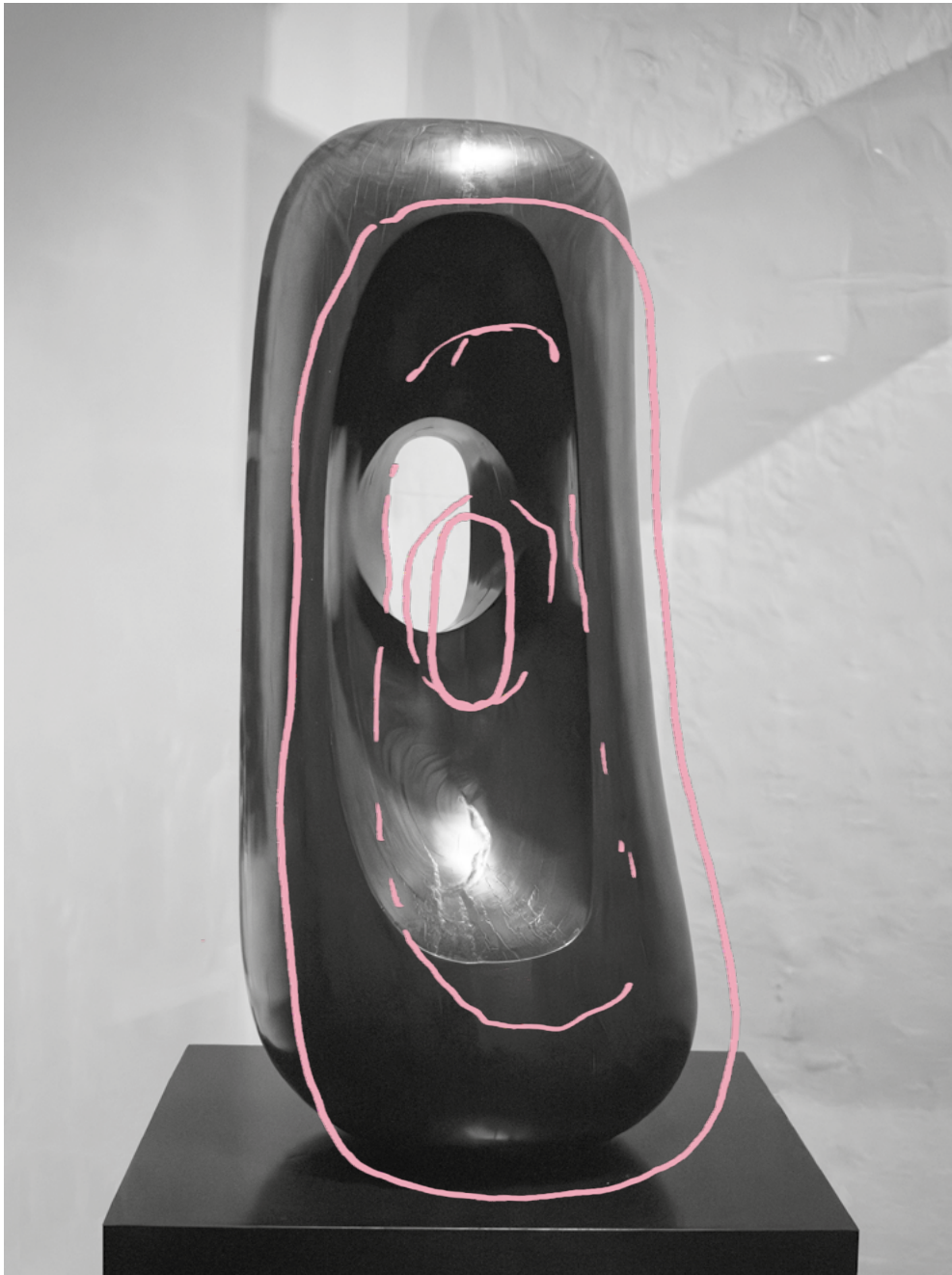


# Bend the sail: Empathy and listening in a norm-breaking age

Mark Malloch Brown



**Hollow form.** The sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and Dag Hammarskjöld shared a close friendship rooted in their mutual love for art. He especially admired her mastery of *lignum vitae*, the world's hardest wood, and she crafted Hollow Form for him from it. Mastering the seemingly impossible demands skill, patience and humility, both for an artist and a leader, and Mark Malloch Brown emphasises this as vital for UN leaders in safeguarding international norms. Reflecting the resilience embodied in the sculpture, the article calls on leaders to stay determined and forge a path towards a more just world.

**Mark Malloch Brown** has worked to advance human rights, justice, and development for more than four decades in a variety of roles: with the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and as a British government minister, as well as with a range of civil society groups and businesses. At the UN, he led the global promotion of the UN Millennium Development Goals as head of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). At the UNDP, and previously as vice president of external affairs at the World Bank, he led reform efforts to increase the impact of both organisations. He later served as Kofi Annan's chief of staff, and then as UN Deputy Secretary General, before joining the British government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, as minister responsible for Africa and Asia from 2007 to 2009. Most recently, he was president of the Open Society Foundations, the world's largest private funder of independent groups working for justice, democratic governance, and human rights. Mark Malloch-Brown was knighted for his contributions to international affairs and is currently on leave from the British House of Lords. He is a Distinguished Practitioner at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government, an adjunct fellow at Chatham House's Queen Elizabeth Program, and has been a visiting distinguished fellow at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization.

Hospitals, power stations, shopping malls hit by missiles. Indiscriminate barrel bombs and chemical weapons deployed against civilians. International law and institutions disrespected and disregarded. The virus of norm-breaking is coursing through the global bloodstream. Why 'virus'? Because norm-breaking is contagious. Each conspicuous act crossing the line between acceptable and unacceptable spreads it a little further, infecting the next wave of victims. From Gaza to Ukraine, Myanmar to Ethiopia, today's world seems beset with super-spreader events.

Leading the young United Nations (UN) over the period during which the Cold War took hold of the world and became increasingly threatening to humanity's survival, Dag Hammarskjöld well understood just how vital, but also fragile, established norms are in the international system. He would have immediately recognised the process underway in our own time. As global power fragments and becomes more dispersed, the room for states to test those limits is growing. That these include both rogue nations but also permanent members of the UN Security Council, most notably Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, only intensifies the contagion.

Hammarskjöld's example also shows that strong leadership can form a sort of vaccine, helping the system to summon up the resilience to fight the virus. Today that vaccine could be usefully injected in several notable places.

The first is the lack of shared global ownership of the legal and normative system. Simply put, that system is

widely – and justly – understood to be the creation of white, Western establishments in the immediate aftermath of 1945. At an event on April 7, 2024 marking the 30th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, President Paul Kagame crystallised this when he hailed his country's choice 'to reverse the arrow of accountability, which used to point outwards, beyond our borders.' Quoting an authoritarian like Kagame is, rightly, contentious. But the image he evoked at that poignant event summed up a necessary shift; from local deference vis-à-vis international norms to local ownership of those norms.

The second realm where good leadership can help to combat the erosion of norms is the generational gap. Globally, values tend to evolve ahead of the cohort in power. But as the pace of change speeds up and, in many countries, old leaders seek to govern populations whose formative life experiences are increasingly distinct from their own, today the outcome can be that those norms go ignored or overruled. Nigeria's 2023 election, for example, saw two front-runners in their 70s seek to govern a country whose average citizen is 19. The norms of any given society are ultimately defined by its people. And when leaders and prospective leaders are so remote from those people, normative rupture ensues.

The third point demanding the attention of today's Hammarskjöld's is the sheer lack of bandwidth to take on so many normative crises. As I write this, wars and humanitarian meltdowns around the world are occurring at a rate not seen in at least a generation. Conflicts are more numerous, last longer, and harm more civilians than at any time since (depending on the measure) the time

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of the Rwandan genocide or earlier. Not for nothing is the historian Christopher Clark’s book *The Sleepwalkers* about the causes of World War One so often cited today. The complex of crises seems to be both overwhelming our leaders and building towards some larger worldwide breakdown of order and values.

This, then, is anything but an easy time to be a leader. Power is shifting and old codes of deference are breaking down. One generation does not share the normative assumptions of the other. And the mounting chaos insists of our leaders a remarkable ability to multitask. But our norm-rupturing age is also, for precisely those reasons, one in which a certain sort of leadership has much greater value: a listening, empathetic, and supple style quite alien to the thrusting, uncompromising dominance still widely pursued in international affairs and beyond.

One model of that style is of course Hammarskjöld himself. Brian Urquhart, Hammarskjöld’s biographer and one of the so-called ‘Last of the Mohicans’ who had worked for the UN at its post-1945 start and became a mentor to me in my own UN career, wrote that the great Secretary-General ‘was wary of publicity and worried about the distorting effect of public success’. Urquhart cited Hammarskjöld fretting about ‘mirroring yourself in an obituary’, or in other words becoming too grand for your own good. Therein he captured something fundamental about the sort of leadership needed to combat norm-erosion today: one with no room for vanity.

The template that most comes to mind is that of the man I consider, along with Hammarskjöld, one of the two truly great Secretaries-General. When international leaders appointed Kofi Annan in December 1996, they had not yet fully realised the visionary and emotional force they were netting. Working by his side, as I had the privilege of doing over many years, I would often marvel at that force. Kofi had an uncanny knack for remembering the sorts of details that were likely keeping his interlocutors up at night. He would be the first to ask them about a sick

relative or the progress of a child’s education. But more than that, he taught me that listening – really listening to what someone is saying, internalising it, and only then responding – is integral to good leadership.

Survey again those crises of our time. They demand a multilateralism more humble towards its non-Western participants; a new cohort of leadership that can connect across the generations and heed and amplify young voices; and a method that can parse and parry the demands of a polycrisis world. These all imply the sort of modesty and emotional intelligence that Kofi possessed more than almost anyone. Such, I believe, are the most important tools in our toolbox as we confront a world of failing norms and retreating values.

One phrase Kofi used to quote stays with me to this day. He proclaimed it to be a morsel of Ghanaian folk wisdom, though I always half-suspected that it was his own invention. ‘We cannot change the winds’ said the man who had grown up on that blustery West African coast, ‘so bend the sail’. There could be no better expression of his leadership philosophy. Many leaders seek to power up the outboard motor and blast through the waves irrespective of the weather. Kofi taught me, and us all, that peace and progress in a messy world demand something more supple. He taught us to harness those winds. ■

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Brian Urquhart, 'Character Sketches: Dag Hammarskjöld', UN News Global perspective human stories, (New York, United Nations, online), <https://news.un.org/en/spotlight/character-sketches-dag-hammarskjold-brian-urquhart>.