The world is emerging from eight long years of the Bush Administration. On Tuesday, January 20th, the day after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Barack Obama was sworn in as the first African-American President of the USA. Elected at a time of global economic meltdown, US troops still at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, unprecedented human-made, potentially cataclysmic ecological changes and the unintended social and political consequences of these and other forces, Obama’s election brought to fruition the hopes of the millions of us, hungry for change, who’ve participated in multiple ways over these last years in creating the conditions for the mass grassroots movement that evolved in support of his candidacy.

However, Obama isn’t distinctive simply because he is Black. He is also the son of a poor white Midwesterner-turnedglobal citizen; a single mother, Peace Corps volunteer & social justice activist who eventually gained a PhD in anthropology. She married and then divorced a Kenyan student, remarrying an Indonesian man with whom Barack Obama and his half sister, Maya, lived for several years. He grew up in the rich soil of an atypical multicultural family, its roots and branches stretching from the Midwestern USA to Kenya, Hawaii and Indonesia. Obama is, in essence, a “third culture kid”, someone who spent a significant amount of time in childhood in one or more cultures. The research on “third culture kids”, suggests that rather than identifying with any one nation, they tend to be adaptable, flexible, finding a sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere. (Hill Useem in Eakin 1998). As such, it seems like Obama’s background positions him outside the confines of multiple conventional discourse communities, particularly as they relate to race, class, ethnicity, religion and nationality. Perhaps this factors into his ability to reach seamlessly beyond the either/or dichotomies of party affiliations, racial identities and the tendency to side on social issues. Instead, he invites us to come together in the service of identifying our common goals and aspirations in the interest of establishing and sustaining our collective future on this planet.

Furthermore, unlike prior Presidents, Obama’s roots are in community organizing, founded on the kinds of skills that make successful community development possible. These include the skills of openness to listening to multiple perspectives, emotional intelligence, facilitation skills, advocacy, mediation and the rhetorical skills necessary to mobilize people into action.

Obama’s presidency soars on a message of hope in the face of the extreme problems facing our country and planet. He is perhaps the most high profile example we currently have of the emergence of what we trust will prove to be the right leader in the right place at the right time.

This article, however, is not about Barack Obama, though it draws inspiration from his example. Instead it is the story of a lesser-known transformative leader called Yiota Ahladas who has played a key role in creating a vibrant culture of participation and partnership in the small city of Burlington, VT. Ahladas shares with Obama multiple outsider statuses, which, like he, are intrinsic aspects of her leadership style that she draws upon as sources of strength as will be described later in this article.

This article is also rooted in my own personal relationship with the city of Burlington, where I lived from 1992-1998, and with Yiota, who is also a friend. She and I shared the genera-
tional influence of the second-wave of feminism, the essence of which is captured by the phrase “the personal is political”. In so saying, this article tacks between social and geographic contexts and the personal context of Yiota’s life, elevating and exposing the relationship between a given leader’s personal experiences, beliefs and values and how these might manifest in actual practices of leadership. Furthermore, a fundamental premise of this article is that there is a mutually reciprocal relationship between a given community, the kind of leadership to which it gives rise and the effects of that leadership back on the community – a social ecology of leadership, so to speak.

I spent three days with Yiota in the spring of 2007 on a “retreat” of our own creation in Sedona, AZ, inviting her into a conversation about the relationship between her background, beliefs, values and her approach to leadership.

A journal article is a particular form of story telling, one that traditionally has not done justice to the actual territory of lived experience. Poetry and other forms of creative writing have the capacity to weave together social facts, interpretations and the more nuanced texture of life-as-lived. I therefore integrate some poems written by both Yiota and myself, in response to some of the most striking of the conversations that we shared.

The Landscape of My Interest

The impetus for writing this article began almost two years ago when I had no conscious awareness of the possibility of electing a visionary African-American president, not to mention an electoral campaign rooted in a searing vision of hope and community-building across difference. At the time I was interested in the fact that, despite the prevailing ultra-right wing political climate of the USA under George W. Bush, many communities across the country were nonetheless deeply engaged in practicing what Frances Moore Lappe (2007) calls “living democracy”, rooted in the principles of sustainable social, economic and environmental development, equity & social justice.

I’ve been keenly interested in participatory forms of community development and governance since my beginnings as a community worker with homeless families in inner city London in the early 1980’s. Influenced by the conscientization theories and practices of Paulo Freire (1970), the ideals of a partnership society (Eisler, 1987) and the vision of a sustainable planet (Goerner, 2008; Moore Lappe, 2007), I wanted to take a more intimate look at a community that was making real strides towards creating partnerships between government and community in the service of sustainable social development. In particular, I was interested in exploring the relationship between the social ecological landscape of a given community, the type of leadership that might flourish against that landscape, and the reciprocal relationship between that formal leadership and the community that it serves. In so saying, I was interested in exploring the possibility of a social ecology of leadership. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) express it, stories need to be understood against the background of already existing “strored landscapes” without which they are not fully intelligible.

I also wanted to share a hopeful and successful story of sustainable development and sustainable leadership practices from within the US context at an historical moment when hope seemed thin on the ground. It’s therefore with some irony that this article pushes up from its roots to break through at this particular juncture.

On Landscapes and Stories:
Burlington, Vermont

Burlington, a city of 40,000 residents, is the largest city in the small state of Vermont. It is situated in the Champlain Valley on the shores of the magnificent Lake Champlain, framed on its far side by the towering Adirondack Mountains of New York state. Lake Champlain winds it way some 110 miles up into Canada where it meets the St. Lawrence River. The city has a long and impressive history of progressive leadership, beginning with the election in 1981 of socialist mayor Bernie Sanders (now Vermont’s Representative in the US Congress), extending for a further fifteen years under Mayor Peter Clavelle. Vermont, the “whitest state in the Union” after Maine and the last state to actually join the original thirteen states of the union, was the first state to outlaw slavery in 1777. Vermonters played a key role in the Underground Railroad, providing refuge to slaves fleeing the South as they made their way to freedom over the Canadian border. However, this is not to romanticize either the state or the city of Burlington. Slavery persisted informally well into the 1800’s and racism is still alive and well in the city.

Despite its small scale, contemporary Burlington shares similar problems to those in larger cities especially related to poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, public transportation, affordable housing, domestic violence, mental health problems & drug and alcohol abuse. In recent years, the racial and ethnic mix of the city has begun to shift dramatically, largely as a result of the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Project. Approximately 52 different European,
African and Asian languages are now spoken in the Burlington school system. The public sector is under great pressure to develop culturally appropriate services in response to the overwhelming challenges confronting these communities and dominant populations have a steep learning curve in terms of developing cultural awareness.

However, Burlington has a strong commitment to equity, participatory governance and community partnerships and the small scale of the city is well suited to such initiatives. A core principle underlying this commitment is the inclusion of the voices of populations, traditionally excluded from having a say in government.

The city is recognized both nationally and internationally for its model of sustainable community development, deeply rooted in a partnership model. A highly participatory Legacy Project was initiated in 1999. This project has involved thousands of residents across ages and backgrounds in creating a common vision for the future of Burlington. This ongoing project informs the city’s vision of sustainable development, grounded in four foundational areas: environmental protection, social equity, education & economic development.

Collaborative, Community Partnerships

The year was 1981. Rooted in a deep understanding of the politics of social class, the then mayor, Bernie Sanders (2), launched Burlington’s ambitious agenda for social justice and equity. This initiative was supported by a diverse coalition of city stakeholders including low-income residents, local police officers as well as academics from the University of Vermont (UVM). The Progressive Party emerged as the vehicle for advancing what was now a widely supported social change agenda. The Progressive party has more or less dominated Burlington’s political scene ever since, offering Burlington a rare opportunity within the USA to pursue the goals of social justice and equity over the long term.

In 1989 Sanders founded the Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO) in order to implement the Mayor’s sustainability and social equity agenda. CEDO has been the “power behind the throne” so to speak in operationalizing the Progressive’s agenda.

Transformative Leadership for a Transformative Organization

The Center for Community and Neighborhoods (C-CAN) is one of CEDO’s three primary divisions. C-CAN is the vibrant arm of the city’s government offering multiple programs that promote civic engagement in the community. These include a community justice center that implements a restorative justice approach; a neighborhood center; conflict resolution projects; study circles focusing on racism; clean up and service days; offender and re-entry programs; refugee assistance programs; Neighborhood Planning Assemblies; a first-response team of volunteers that takes action to clean up after acts of vandalism and much more.

C-CAN is deeply rooted in a partnership approach to addressing the community’s needs, working with social groups whose lives are often overlooked including families living in poverty, recently resettled immigrants, and people of color in general. It is an integral part of city government and offers a unique spectrum of initiatives that inspire and support community participation, citizen action and responsible municipal government.

Yiota Ahladas is the Co-Founder and Director of C-CAN. She brings a sense of passionate commitment and possibility to her work.

According to Ahladas

People make happen what they help to create. So we invite people into conversation about the possibility of the future. It’s the responsibility of government to ask the right questions because the quality of what you create is going to reflect the quality of the questions you’ve been asking. (Ahladas, 2006)

Ahladas plays an instrumental role in the ongoing processes of transformation that Burlington is so deeply engaged in. C-CAN recruits 40 Americorps VISTA volunteers a year. VISTA volunteers are not traditionally recruited by city governments to work in local neighborhoods. However, Ahladas played a central role in envisioning the building of an army of VISTA volunteers who could jump-start the engine for revitalizing the community which, at the time of C-CAN’s inception had a poverty rate of 39%. The use of VISTA volunteers is seen as a key element of a conscious capacity building strategy. It develops leadership potential within the volunteers, with many of them subsequently taking on important offices in both the non-profit and local government sectors in Burlington. Ahladas sees VISTA workers as crucial to the Burlington Neighborhood Project that actively seeks to involve local residents in shaping their communities.

In 2006 Ahladas won a prestigious Eisenhower Fellowship that took her to South Africa and New Zealand to exchange ideas with local community leaders concerned with sustainable community development.

An announcement in the Burlington Free Press of Ahladas’s fellowship described her as having “inspired her city government colleagues and hundreds of AmeriCorps VISTA workers who have reached a little higher because of her spirit and infectious can-do attitude. A friend of hers says that it’s the “Zorba” in her that makes her wholeheartedly embrace whatever life brings her way.” (Reid, 2005).

Leading from the Outside-In and the Inside-Out

Yiota Ahladas was born in 1960 in Utica, NY. She spent most of her childhood in Springfield, MA, a solidly working class city to the west of Boston. She is a first generation North American, born to Greek immigrants.

My grand mother’s grandmother was a village healer/midwife and the Greek tradition says that in every other generation, the healing legacy gets passed along. My grandmother used to pick the plants and do healing. My mother grew up in the shadow of this very tiny but very powerful woman who had dreams and actualized her dreams. She was very smart and a fierce feminist. She was the first girl in the village to go to school – girls in the village don’t go after the 3rd grade – and my grand mother said why not? I’m going to go to school! And she went to school and she became the town clerk.

Yiota inherited her grandmother’s fiery spirit. She played a key activist role in city government, initiating the movement to draft Domestic Partnership policy in 1993 when Burlington
became the first city in the country to pass a retain a policy to provide equal benefits to domestic partners regardless of sexual orientation. Her central role in this initiative led to her being targeted in a reaction to the policy within the city’s administration, which at the time was under the leadership of a one-term Republican mayor, Peter Brownell elected as a result of a citywide backlash against the domestic partnership legislation. She told me that when she organized around the issue she really felt the extent to which I was an outsider. Before that I wasn’t as aware of it because I was in such a progressive bubble. But that’s when the true colors came out – in millions of ways – in hate-filled phone calls and even one death threat – but ultimately it manifested in the municipality when the Republican mayor, Peter Brownell, got elected.

Her key role in formulating this landmark legislation left her in a vulnerable position. She found herself being publicly attacked by Brownell who wanted her dismissed from her job. This strategy backfired as the community powerfully rallied around Ahladas. Not only was her position saved, she was eventually promoted. However, rather than taking an oppositional stance to Brownell in the face of this hostility, Ahladas built a personal connection with him, striving toward building a relationship based in mutual respect. Brownell, who went on to take a seat in the Vermont State Senate, eventually ended up voting for passage of the Civil Union legislation in the State of Vermont in 2000, affirming same-sex couples the same rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities as Vermont gives to heterosexual married couples.

In hearing this story, I am struck by Yiota’s ability to stay in relationship with folks through the most difficult times and in the most difficult places. She says that as soon as you know anybody and begin to share your life a little bit – become human beings instead of labels, you know – for whatever reason we started to relate around our commonalities rather than our differences.

For many leaders, this statement can sound clichéd. However, for Yiota, relationship building across differences is the stuff of her everyday existence, not only in relation to her ethnicity and sexual orientation but also because she is “late deafened” third generation deaf.

**Counterpoint**

In my head buzzes the sound of disease
A tiny hiss, a rubble, a roar that haunts me.
A part of me leaves me
I notice it more each day.

I am left alone
With only the noises in my head
Perhaps it’s time
For me to be alone.

I put my ear to your lips
The whispers on the pillow
Safe in your arms I cry
Because the man in the store repeats himself

Three times before I hear him.
I cry because I cannot hear
The bass tones of the Bach Cantata
Or the howling wind outside our bedroom.

I cry for when
I will not hear
Whispers on the pillow.

You say it’s okay, I love you
Think of all the other ways we are.
But will you still love me
When all words are beyond my reach?

At the theater you sit close
And the words of the stage come to me.

What if I did not have you
To speak the world into my ear?

With the sounds that fade away
I am fading too.
Perhaps I shall disappear into a shell from the sea
A nautilus spiraling inward
To a quiet center point.

To a quiet center point.

- Yiota Ahladas

Yiota shares:

My father’s father was deaf, my father’s aunts and uncles were deaf, and my father refuses to admit to my deafness. My father, a deaf man, lives alone in a silent house, lives alone in a silent world. A life, like his, I will not live.

I wondered to myself about the cost to Yiota not only of living a life in a silent world, like her father, but the alternative she has chosen of being in a high profile professional position that places such a huge demand on her to acculturate to the hearing world. I asked her about her outsider status, particularly as it related to deafness and the pressure to assimilate, recognizing the fear of my own potential for deafness, lurking behind my question. She states

Outsider and insiderness only work if you recognize them. Part of the gift of having been deaf and of growing up with a deaf father…I think there’s a way that I miss a lot of the ways the inside world responds to my insiderness – and I don’t care! (we both laugh) it’s sort of like everyone else’s problem.

As we talk about her deafness over time, a more complicated picture emerges. In a recent e-mail to me Yiota writes

I’ve had a challenging week on the hearing front w/ accommodations not being met even when I’ve asked for them and the technology is there etc., being excluded not because I can’t belong but because the dominant paradigm can’t step out of itself…times like these…you don’t just lose your hearing you lose your own voice…you begin to take responsibility not only for your own need but for the discomfort of the persons around you… It’s easy to develop a “culture/habit of not understanding”. You have been punished for not understanding, so you stop trying. If you keep trying and keep not understanding, you keep being exhausted and stressed…you simply stop trying and enter the culture of make believe… the frustrating side of hearing loss…some many gifts too I know…

To be in relationship with Yiota is an exercise in connection; we need to be mindful of extraneous noise in the environment, to where we position our faces in relation to each other. She lip-reads and often has to turn down her hearing aids. Yiota said

You don’t hear with your ears at this stage… you hear with your brain and your eyes (lip reading) my left ear has next to no hearing left… my right ear has something with the hearing aid but is considered profound loss…my speech discrimination and ability to function on the crumbs of hearing I have in my right ear are beyond what is usual with this degree of loss.
One night I dreamed that Yiota’s hearing got dramatically worse. I had to sit right up in her face so that she could “hear” me. She had to touch my lips to know what I was saying.

Through the dream I realized that to maintain a relationship with Yiota, both of us had to make a leap that necessitated greater intimacy. No real connection could be sustained without our direct, close eye-to-eye contact.

Yiota speaks of disclosing to members of her work community that she cannot hear in large groups. The circle of the group therefore has to move in close in order to be able to hear. I note that in this, her deafness is the gift that she gives to the whole community, but one which takes a huge personal toll.

**Managing by Walking Around**

She says that she likes to walk about city hall

Stopping to chat
So joyous in her curiosity
Where are you from?
Who are your people?
How did you get here?
How can I help?

After hours
The janitor stoops
bucket and mop in hand
transformed and transported
he, an intrepid traveler who trekked
over
dangerous mountain paths
crossing enemy lands
The only shelter the canopy
of Tibetan Buddhism

**OM GATE GATE PARAGATE**
**PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA**

A picture of the Dalai Lama folded
into his papers
His mother cannot speak English
and is deaf
He needs to help her through the
thickets and tangles
that line the steep passes
of US immigration bureaucracy
mama cannot hear nor speak on the
telephone/deaf

She says:
I hear your mother
for I too am deaf

Yiota considers spending time just hanging out with folks, getting to know their experiences and concerns, to be the most important part of her role. She demonstrates a seemingly insatiable, genuine curiosity about people – particularly folks who are generally overlooked. She shared the example of a conversation she had when she stopped to chat with a janitor, after hours, at City Hall. He described to her the long and treacherous journey he undertook that brought him from Tibet to Burlington, VT. In the course of this informal conversation, she learned that this man’s mother, visiting from Tibet, was deaf.

I arranged to get her hearing aids – money, testing etc. – no way to get hearing aids in Tibet. Before she arrived to visit him in the US, this man hadn’t seen or talked to his Mom in 15 years - since he was 15 and had to flee in the night. After she returned to Tibet from the US he was able to talk to her by phone…when she was in the US and got the aids she grabbed my hands in a tearful/prayful clasp saying the light had been turned on in her life again and she would live a new life, not only be able to talk to her son but also her grandchildren. Tattered shreds of the Dalai Lama’s robe were pinned to her robes…quite a sight.

**Cultural Fusion: Creating New Traditions**

You come into a room in City Hall which would usually be stuffy public hearings and stuffed suits and there’s 400 people there
Children are painting
People eating food together
it’s Black and it’s Yellow and it’s White
and it’s people with disabilities and

it’s elderly and it’s kids

- Yiota Ahladas

Yiota states that one of the most important of C-CAN’s initiatives is the creation of new traditions that celebrate, hold and recognize the space of communities that are emerging as multiple ethnic, religious cultures and histories become newly intertwined in this small city.

Because we’re a mixture of so many cul-

**Yiota Ahladas’s story illustrates the inextricable relationship between the personal landscape of a given leader’s history and experience and that of the community that she serves.**

Winter 2010
On Sustainability

Yiota hosts many visitors from other cities who come to Burlington in order to gain a blueprint for how to develop a sustainable community. For Yiota, the first step is to help visitors give up their search for a blueprint so that they can develop a more holistic and context-based approach, rooted in the social ecological landscape of their own communities.

Where sustainability really counts is in culture, is in people. That’s where it really counts. Where the police chiefs and the state’s attorney and the activists and the priest and the refugees all sit in the room and talk about racial profiling. That’s a huge transformation and evolution of consciousness for the culture to be able to do that. And that’s what allows things to happen. It’s like - you can’t plan it. You have to organically create the environment that allows it to emerge. That’s what makes it sustainable…you need to have an unshakeable faith in the people you’re working with…it’s a combination of the vision, the bigger political commitment - all of those things but there’s a bigger possibility that emerges through being a learning community. Learning your way into the future, discovering your way into the possibility that emerges through being a learning community - all of those things but there’s a bigger vision, the bigger political commitment working with…it’s a combination of the an unshakeable faith in the people you’re making it sustainable…you need to be lost – not that you’re ever comfortable with it but you’ve got to be in the unknown.

Learning into the Future

46 years old
approaching menopause
she is entering into a time of not knowing
losing the anchors in her body
that keep her in tune with rhythms
cycles
moon
stars
tides
days
months
years
to lead now
is to surrender to not knowing
getting lost in the darkness
In the silence.
It is scary to breathe in here.
Is the world in menopause?
Ice melts out of season
hot oceans swollen like breasts
break onto the shores
flooding our homes
long sporadic menstrual periods that will not subside.

What crone wisdom will invite world leaders
To plunge into the dark
empty womb of not knowing
encounter the grief at the prospect of infertility
before the possible shedding of the last egg?

- Shoshana Simons

I ask Yiota about where she sees her leadership going over the coming years. She talks about noticing patterns of cycles that seem to last about five years. However, the next step seemed to be about getting lost and feeling comfortable with that. She related this to menopause because the whole orientation of your body has been toward giving birth and your body’s suddenly saying “you can’t do this anymore” – you’re entering a different era and in a way your whole orientation has been about the future, even if you haven’t had children. You hit this point when it isn’t about that anymore in your body – but I think it’s a spiritual journey, too, where you get more comfortable with being lost – not that you’re ever comfortable with it but you’ve got to be in the unknown.

We wonder together as to how this poignant statement seems to relate so closely to the challenge of leading in these times, more generally. Theories abound in leadership and management texts about sustainable development, but when all is said and done, we are off the map. We don’t know where we’re headed.

Yiota Ahladas’s story illustrates the inextricable relationship between the personal landscape of a given leader’s history and experience and that of the community that she serves. She holds out the possibility of being comfortable with uncertainty whilst leading with a sense of hope, faith and trust in the power of inclusive, participatory governance.

Yiota’s leadership on the local level models what President Obama is now modeling on the national and international level. Both leaders appear to have cultivated the humility to be able to tolerate the collective anxiety associated with not-knowing, are able to co-exist with uncertainty, to move out from there to connect with others in ever-widening circles and webs of inclusion as part of the complex process involved in taking right action.

References


Footnotes

(1) For more information, see www.cedo.ci.burlington.vt.us/legacy/index.html
(2) Americorps VISTA is the national service program established in 1965 as Volunteers in Service to American in order to fight poverty. For more information see www.americorps.org/about/programs/vista.asp