Robin Hoover—John Jay

Good evening. Before I begin, let me tell a brief story. In 2002, I was in Mexico City in an international group of clergy, activists, and government-related people talking about immigration reform. One man challenged me. In his mind, since I was a privileged, white, male living in an imperial country, I would have to come and live among the poor in Mexico for a decade, learn what they know and then, and only then, would I be able to talk about changes. I said he was mistaken. The people who need to change are white guys in Washington, D.C. The conversation was interrupted when Don Samuel Ruiz, the former bishop of Chiapas entered the room. We all rose and greeted him. “Don Samuel it is so great that you are here, etc., etc. What do you think about immigration reform and so on?” His first sentence was, “Some people in the US need to change their minds.” I wanted to spike my bible! It’s still true. Some white members of Congress like your own Peter King need to change their minds about who is a threat and who is not, about who is in control and who is not, about how power should be shared in a democracy, and so on. I’m a white guy born and currently living again in Texas and a citizen of this Empire, but I’m not the problem.

I stand before you to say that I love the migrants who push their way through the searing heat of the borderlands in the day and the cactus thorn nights running away from cartels and law enforcement and running toward love and employment. Were the circumstances different, I would do exactly what they have done and continue to do. I know this because I have chosen to be with them as much as possible from my station in life as pastor, academic, employer, neighbor, advocate, and friend. I can’t choose my race or my nationality, but I can choose to be human and human.

It’s up to each of us to choose how to spend the time in life we’re given by God. I have now given 27 years of my life in ministry and advocacy for these people, and it is with great pleasure that I look out upon you because as I grow more and more white hair, it’s going to be up to you to see that these people flourish and prosper, but not only that. It’s going to be up to you to see that white, north American imperialist capitalist people learn that it is in the interests of markets, in the interests of legitimate governments, in the interests of human rights, in the interests of faithful peoples all over the world to find life-saving and life-giving ways to share this planet and specifically how to share resources and opportunities. God bless you in your interest and your presence here tonight.

I want to record my sincere gratitude to everyone who has helped to make this moment of intersection possible. There are many persons who have been directly involved in the making of this program. I cannot even try to list them, but I have a personal word of gratitude for Maria Fernanda who has made this possible. Seeing Keisdo, Omar, and Sandra again is a great joy. The arrival of Fr. Priscialliano or Priscy as I know him is just fabulous. I know some of the presenters, and I look forward to all the presentations. Enabling sponsors and institutions are listed in your literature, and I need to use this precious time for other things. But I also want to say a word of gratitude for some of my friends in the audience.

It’s probably true that the Japanese discovered the Americas long before Christopher Columbus. And, certainly true that other Europeans came before he did. But when Columbus came, so did some priests. We’ve had some interesting church-state issues ever since. This particular member of the clergy has some strong words for his government, not just blessings. In 2006 I visited two shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas run by fellow Mexican National Human Rights Award winners Olga Sanchez and Flor de Maria Rigoni. At Olga’s shelter Chiapas, I was interviewing a kid who couldn’t have had his 16th birthday yet. Both of his legs were cut off as high as possible when he was thrown from one of the Beasts, the trains that lumber and sway along the tracks from the south to the north. He had been thrown off by a gang member. The day of the visit, his friend was playing the guitar as the young guy sat in his wheelchair in the chapel. I was doing my best to interview him in Spanish. Several minutes into this scene, he looked up at me and asked in Spanish, “Are you a minister?” I responded, “Yes.” He said, “You don’t look like it, so he put this little cross around my neck.” Daily it reminds me that there is an expectation on the part of the migrants to see the church and the other human institutions in the midst of their stories, and it’s a reminder to me that, at least right now, the church, civil society, universities, foundations, medical groups, and even law enforcement institutions are missing in action. They should be there with the people, and they are not. It’s just like Occupy Wall Street. The Invisible Hands that Adam Smith theorized about so long ago in the Wealth of Nations really are invisible, are they not? I mean, you rarely find them attached to flesh and blood and offering you help.

I come this evening, in part, to give witness to the fact that you can find an intersection in your life with the great stories of migration and to give witness to the fact that you can make a very large difference even if you think you’re working alone much of the time. Even a tiny mosquito can agitate a full-grown person all night long. You can have an effect. Itt has been my calling since I was very young to serve the church in some way or another. I’ve served congregations for more than 32 years. While I was a student, I worked in hospitals: city, county, state, and federal hospitals. I also worked in construction as a superintendent. I built schools, banks, restaurants, and offices. I had to have a way to pay for my education, and I absorbed a lot about how the world hangs together during those years because I was combining my work and my classes every day.

During the great Central American Exodus in the 80s, a mentor of mine took me to the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas where I helped unload a semi-truck load of 50 pound sacks of rice for the shelters that were providing services to refugees. I got deeply involved, started my PhD program in political science and finally wrote a dissertation concerning the politics of faith-based groups working in migration policy.

Then came Tucson. When I arrived in Tucson, Arizona in 2000, there were 650,000 migrant apprehensions by the Border Patrol in just one year and just in the Tucson Sector. Often, 4-5,000 persons in just one day. Persons were dying in our desert primarily from dehydration. They were also freezing, suffocating in the trunks of cars, and drowning. They were drinking urine, pond water, and water with germs, parasites, and heavy metals.

A relatively small group of us held up our arms, pointed to the desert, and said death in the desert was wrong. We asked who wanted to talk about it. We mobilized congregations, human rights activists, civil society members, all kinds of conscionable people. We went to the media. We founded an organization called Humane Borders. The border would be OK, we thought, so long as they didn’t kill people and violate their rights, and that sort of thing, so we worked to make it humane. We wanted to take death out of the immigration equation, and we did something about it. 86% of the land in southern Arizona is public and operated by different federal agencies of one stripe or another: fish and wildlife, national park service, forest service, Bureau of Land Management. I speak public administration. We went to the agencies, obtained permits, bought our insurance, built and deployed water stations. We tried to get a permit to operate in a certain area. 14 migrants died all in one day, twelve others became living mummies. All of them could have been saved by the water station we tried to put up. We were catapulted into the world-wide media. We grew to more than 100 stations. One day, I was giving interviews to five foreign film crews at the same station at the same time. We’ve now been in every major media market, every newspaper, every network and in dozens of documentaries all over the earth. I’m not exaggerating: Al Jazeera, Mandarin Chinese News Agency, Pakistani Military News, Pacific Rim, Europe, South America, on and on and on. More than 15,000 persons came to us from all over the world to volunteer and give part of their lives to this cause, and unfortunately, the need remains.

We’ve proven that the water stations work. We gave away more than 30,000 gallons of water each year, and other organizations sprang up to extend the work of Humane Borders. We know from the University of Arizona’s Center for Applied Spatial Analysis that water stations work. They are statistically significant, and we’ve saved many, many lives. Pima County Government gave us $25,000 each year for the work. Congregations, organizations, and individuals gave us more than $150,000 and sometimes $250,000/ year to keep up this work. But US policies continue to make things worse.

The good news for the moment is that a smaller percentage of the people living on this earth today are migrating than before. The very bad news is that the absolute number of people migrating is still rising and that more and more persons from that number are dying.

The Border Patrol has more than tripled in size since 2000. It has built fences, installed surveillance, launched manned aircraft and drones, put agents on horseback, built barricades, installed ground sensors, funneled migrants into more and more harsh terrain, and every single thing they have done is correlated directly with either more migrant deaths or a higher percentage of migrant deaths among those who try to cross the border. Agents are increasingly working in Mexico with the Calderon government in a drug war that is foolish and shamefully deadly.

The Border Patrol operates on the government’s fiscal year beginning October 1. Since October 1 of 2011, through August, --we don’t have the September numbers yet-- at least 168 human remains have been recovered and processed just through the office of the Pima County Medical Examiner. The number of agents and the amount of technology is greatly expanded. The economy is in the toilet, and fewer migrants are coming. Yet a higher percentage of those who are coming are dying.

The former Commissioner of the then Immigration and Naturalization Service, Doris Meissner signed a plan in August 1993 that predicted enormous death tolls if the US followed the plan to expand border enforcement. Death in the desert since 1993 can only be understood as a deliberate, intentional part of the strategy of the United States government to attempt to control migration on its southern border, and it does not have to be this way.

I could go on for hours on how bad things are and how bad things could be. Google my name, and you can read and watch videos for a month if you want more details. While I’m here, I’ll learn more about how things are here and with you, specifically.

We’re coming to a very dangerous time in world history. Harm de Blij is a noted geographer. And, by the way, geographers happen to be doing some of the best theory work out there right now. DeBlij came up with a typology, if you will, of the peoples of the earth. There are Globals. These are the people who, like some of us who were whisked by plane to attend this conference, have credit cards, go from place to place, eat the same fast food wherever we land, and have the pleasures associated with wealth—though I would argue that is a relative concept. I’m just a poor preacher. Many people agree, they’ve heard me preach.

Then, there are the Locals, the people who are born and who live close to where they were born all of their lives. Finally, there are the Mobals. He creates a term to talk about those persons who are migrating. These are important people. They have huge incentives to uproot themselves and go to another place. I generally avoid quotations, but let me read this one to you: “The earth is in a race against time. Mobals challenge the power of place, carrying with them the assets and liabilities of locality and competing in new and unfamiliar environs for livelihood and security. Their world is rapidly urbanizing; gone will be the days when local meant rural and global meant urban. The great majority of the still-to-be-born will arrive in poor-country conurbations numbering 50 million or more, {{the kind of places that will make New York and Mexico City look small]] vast urban regions signaling a fundamental transformation of human society. They will be the migrants, the great internationalizers of the twenty-first century. A sufficient number of them must see their hopes translated into reality, their local values accommodated, their efforts rewarded, to yield individual commitment to the order and stability that are the aims of the globals who will continue to exercise control. In a world suffused with weapons of all kinds, there is no other option.” He thinks, and I agree, that we will have a lot more small, but very violent regional conflicts precisely because we’re not sharing this planet.

Let me try and explain that. I’ve been to Zuccotti Park. I was there last November just after OWS began. Those people—and many are my friends—will not take over Wall Street and substitute a new financial system. But they do have a job to make Wall Street take notice of the impacts it has upon the rest of the world, and specifically to stop privatizing all the benefits of an economic system that socializes all the risk. The Mobals are moving. This mighty empire cannot stop them. They’re coming. They are living and going to continue living among us even though places like Arizona can help move people around for a short time. And, it is our job, whether we’re activists, future law enforcement officials, academics, or whatever, to see that we show those who are in power that it is in their best interests to adapt to the migrations of this earth. Apart from that, the patchwork quilt is torn, and the melting pot boils over. We have to stop the hatred and stop the pig-headed politicians who profit from the misery of those they put down.

I learned more than 40 years ago that the most dangerous words that can be spoken in public are these: “La Patrie En Danger.” The Country is in Danger. The whole concept of nationalism as we practice it and as it has been transformed into the Department of Homeland Security, the Secure Communities Act, the National Defense Authorization Act, the environmental waivers and the High Intensity Enforcement Zones and what I simply call the Low-Intensity Warfare of the US Government being waged among us on US soil and increasingly all around the world and especially in the transportation corridors has got to be transformed into a world that respects human life, respects human dignity, respects human rights, respects the Rule of Real Law, and pays deference to the God who created us to be human.

God is political, and so am I. Rightfully, so too are religious peoples around the world. They have worldviews. They have policy preferences. Diversity is OK. It’s part of nature. It helps us adapt as a human race to the exigencies and externalities of life.

But we have problems. The priests stepped off the boat with Columbus, and we immediately had problems. Our Lady of Guadalupe represents the marriage of Mesoamerican spirituality with the church but we still have problems. The church sometimes interviews migrants to learn their stories, sends blankets, soap and toothpaste, but we still have problems. Yet the church, singularly, has within it the capacity to be and to become one of the most important change agents in our time on this subject. God bless Roman Catholic Cardinal Emeritus Mahoney who in a Los Angeles Times op-ed piece just the other day called for the Governor of California, Mr. Brown, to sign a piece of legislation that would militate against the Arizona-style legislation that requires local law enforcement to, in effect, be federalized and continue to abuse migrants.

In the history of these United States, faith communities, most notably Christians and Jews, but some others, too, actually invented and articulated every human service delivery system. We invented health care as we know it, mental health, educational institutions, life insurance, orphanages, on an on and on. In the history of these Red and Blue states, faith communities first articulated and worked out every single social movement in the history of the United States of America. They built institutions, universities, hospitals, on and on and on. They trained specialized members of the clergy. They funded missions and ministries. They lobbied legislators. They called Presidents to task. And, right now, on the issues of immigration, migration, human rights, migrant safety, social justice, I want to know to ask out loud, “Where are these communities? Specifically, Where is the church?” Maybe we need to have national debates among the various religious bodies about who can do more to help the poor instead of listening to Mitt and Barack talk about who is responsible for the poor. It’s a given, the church should be there among the poor teaching the world how to heal and take care of itself.

Instead, the church is becoming nationalist, conservative, self-serving, self-centered, increasingly private and scared of its own shadow. The church is increasingly subservient to the state. It is raising up among its ranks more priests than prophets, and this is not good. And, it’s not good for those of you who are concerned about human rights. These are your natural allies. Obama is making Caesar Chavez’ home a national monument to the United FarmWorkers. If you look back at that movement, you’ll always find a cross at the front of the march. If you study the history of Civil Rights in the US, you’ll find the church in the forefront. The Metropolitan Community Church had worked out all kinds of issues for the LGBT communities 50 years ago but you wouldn’t know it to look at many of the large national bodies of Christians who are still throwing rocks at God’s children.

If you leave immigration reform to the markets, you are going to be disappointed. People like Jason Riley who wrote “Let Them In” give great accounts of the Conservative, Libertarian perspective that calls for open borders and flat labor markets so everyone can participate. The most open borders crowd in the entire United States is made up of Wall Street Journal types who are economically driven people. But they are opposed by equally strong and more numerous red state, main street conservatives who don’t want unfair competition and who think someone speaking Spanish in the grocery store check-out line is a violation of their rights. And, friends, I speak knowledgeably when I say there are many, many Democrats who are not migrant friendly. Don’t assume anything. Community organizers know that we cannot afford to have any permanent friends or any permanent enemies.

If you leave immigration to governments, you will be disappointed. Why? Because governments respond primarily to the interests, and migrants have no strong advocates, can’t organize very noticeably, and have few resources to purchase access to the halls of Congress.

If you leave immigration reform to the people, you’ll be disappointed because as Aviva Chomsky has taught us, the public endorses ridiculous, unfounded myths about immigration.

I will say that in the long run, immigration must be addressed very thoroughly by civil society, by human rights groups, by religious bodies. The change that comes through those processes is very, very slow, but it is always very substantive change.

If you leave it to piecemeal, episodic efforts to realize change, you will also be disappointed. I’m all for the Dream Act. I live in hope, but I’m not very optimistic. And, I’ll have more to say about this in a minute.

What is happening in the desert southwest borderlands is indicative of how the whole of the US is thinking. Right now, the policy of the US is to make it as physically difficult at possible to enter the US. This has the effect of destroying the environment and killing migrants. It is the policy of the US to drive up the cost of the migration as high as possible. This has the effect of transferring billions of dollars from the migrants to the cartels (or mafia as it is known in northern Sonora) and killing migrants by commodifying them and putting them into the hands of economically driven people instead of friends, relatives, and neighbors who knew the routes in days gone by. It is the policy of the US to drive migrants out into the most difficult, more horrendous parts of the desert as a deterrent to migration, and this has the effect of just plain killing migrants. It’s immoral. It is the policy of the US to pick and choose who will become refugees. This has the effect of telling the faith communities that actually resettle refugees to whom they will show hospitality. Like the Apostle Paul, I’m a Christian by choice and a citizen of this empire by an accident of birth.

This is an educational institution, and I’m academically trained, not just an activist. You will be writing papers, theses, dissertations. Some of you just might take my place, the places of others in this conference, and even write the path-finding, ground-breaking studies that will transform the experience of human migration. It has been my great joy to work with a number of students in the last decade, and several of them have already written theses, dissertations, graduated, and published books based on their studies. I’ve been fortunate to work with a student who did her dissertation on how faith-based activist groups shaped the public discourse on migration, one student who did an ethnography on the faith-based groups working in migration policy from an anthropological perspective incorporating all kinds of continental sociology and critical school theory. I’ve helped folks work on border histories. I’ve helped yet another colleague to collect chapters on how religious folks fit into migration and human rights. A recent Harvard PhD dissertation traces the contributions of theological worldviews on border activism. I like that one because it includes a chapter on me.

I’m a pastor and bible scholar so let me just tell you one little story. You don’t have to go very far in the scriptures to find migration stories. Abraham left his home. Moses led a whole people to go to another place. The Children of Israel were virtually all put in Exile at one time by the Babylonian Empire. Empires that push people around are not new stories. The story of Ruth is an immigration story. Jesus was a refugee. The story of the Good Samaritan is a border story. The Apostle Paul lived out much of his life working on the citizenship question. On and on and on. There is power and principle in these stories. One day Jesus was teaching. Imagine one day you give your coat to someone in trust so you can borrow enough money to eat. You buy it back at the end of the day so you can have cover and comfort that night. Imagine someone sues you for it, that is demands it because you couldn’t pay. (Before I go any further, this basically the economic motivation that drives much of human migration: the inability to navigate and negotiate the system that is basically rigged against many people.) So Jesus said, imagine that someone sues you for your cloak, your outer garment. He says, give them your inner garments, too. What does that mean? It means that if someone or some institution is so blatant as to take everything you have, give them every single thing you have and moon the court. To be naked in Jesus’ time was not a sin. But to gaze upon someone who was naked was. Shame on the courts that made you naked. Shame on you who do nothing to clothe the naked.

There’s a passage of great importance in Matthew 25: Nations are judged by whether or not they give food, clothes, water, welcome, ministry to the sick, and ministry to the imprisoned. According to this teaching of Jesus, yuou’re looking at a hungry, naked, thirsty, unwelcome, sick, and imprisoned Jesus by your inactions to do the right things. Whoa. That’s the resume of a migrant, and this nation is judged by what it is doing.

I would like to moon the US and judge this nation for what it is doing to the migrants. I share this because just maybe one person in this room will take this up as their cause, or one person knows someone who can make this happen. I have a dream to use what we’ve learned in the faith communities and translate that into the world of human rights in order to hold up to this nation just what it is doing to the migrating peoples it encounters.

Every day, the United States is returning migrants across the border to Mexico, flying migrants back to countries of origin, expelling US born citizens, especially expelling US born children. I sat with Margarita Zavalla wife of Felipe Calderon and told her that the next time she got the chance, she simply must begin referring to these children as American Refugees. The story is bleak and unnecessarily tragic and inhumane.

Anyway, here’s my dream. Maybe someone can grab a part of this and run with it. I want a panel of scholars on both sides of the Mexican-US border to come up with a short, practical list of survey questions based on scholarly literature to create a survey that gets to the status of the migrants being returned. What is their experience in the US, their experience with law enforcement, their health status, their family status and so on. In short, what is the human rights status of the migrants being returned?

Now, it’s not enough to do this one after another after another as they come home and just compile some stats. What needs to be done at the end of a fiscal year is to administer this survey at five or ten ports of entry in Mexico using the power of the Mexican government all in the same 24 hour period so we can measure the human rights status of persons expulsed from this country. We could report that status in every media outlet in the US and around the world. And, we would do the test exactly the same way again in six months, and next year, and the years after that so that we could actually measure whether or not we are making human rights progress. In short, we could “moon” the US. The US is using these people, and suing them for their outer garments. We could learn about the differences of law enforcement experiences in Arizona versus Missouri, the differences in the health status of a migrant living in New York for six years versus the migrant caught in the desert at the border after three days of torturous walking. We could compare the treatment of migrants by Border Patrol Agents, ICE agents, and FBI. We could find out the effects of lateral repatriations on separating husbands and wives and fathers and sons to different ports. We could measure impacts upon the lives of unaccompanied minors.

For more than a decade, I and others did everything we could to bring attention to the deaths in the desert. That work continues and must continue because if and when the economy improves, there will be a huge amount of suffering and a large number of deaths as migrants choose to risk coming to the US. Enforcement-only will not stop the migration. It’s physically impossible. In the meantime, we need to focus on the creation and administration of an instrument that measures not just the epiphenomenon of migrant deaths but the epiphenomenon of declining human rights status at our border. I testify to you as I testified at the First Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights that the US undertook that migrants are thirstier, hungrier, more tired, more abused, more desperate, and more neglected today than in any of the years with which I have been working with them.

There must be a new sense of urgency about these matters. There must be new coalitions forged. Traditional thinking must be reviewed. Let me give you an example. A large number of faith organizations resettle refugees and spend money to help groups of people around the world. These denominations and groups are afraid to help the undocumented because they might jeopardize their revenue stream from the US government that helps them resettle refugees. That’s horse feathers. Turn the job over to community groups and let them take care of the 40,000 or so refugees to be resettled. Turn your attention to the millions involved in the unjust immigration system. I am pleased that many human rights groups are involved in trying to address human trafficking issues, human slavery, sex slavery, and more. Much more needs to be done. No argument from me. But this cannot come at the point of diverting attention from the enormous, oppressive engine of economic migration in general. If we become complacent to the many, we will no longer see the few.

What must we do?

As emerging scholars we must learn our stories well and use them as the source of human and political transformation.

Immigration reforms:

Those who are already here:

Those who wish to come here:

Package these proposals, find champions.

KARL MARX QUOTE