MIGRANTS

MATTER:

a different

law and order

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Hoover has worked on behalf of persons migrating in Mexico and across the U.S. southwest border for four decades. Ordained in the tradition of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), his academic preparation was in journalism, social ethics, and political science. His dissertation was in the narrow field of religion and politics theory focusing on religious nonprofit organizations providing goods and services to migrants. That work became the handbook for creating several nonprofit organizations, most notably Humane Borders, Inc., a social welfare nonprofit based in Tucson, Arizona. Humane Borders strategically places blue barrels of potable water on federal, state, county, city, and private lands in the desert to reduce the numbers of migrant deaths. His work put him into the spotlight of national and international media, documentary film making, university lectures, meetings with Department of Homeland Security officials, and in the halls of the U.S. Congress where he has testified about human rights, migrant safety and immigration policy reform. In 2006, he received Mexico’s prestigious National Human Rights Award from Mexico’s President Felipe Calderon. He is the author of Creating Humane Borders: a migration ethic and numerous academic book chapters and newspaper opinion pieces. He has appeared in hundreds of legacy media news stories, cable television talk shows, community forums, and as a guest speaker in numerous pulpits.

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FOREWORD

In May of 2001, a group of 26 migrants including one smuggler crossed the U.S.-Mexico border just west of Lukeville, Arizona. A few days later, 14 of them died because of lack of water. Eleven of the group went home with mummified fingertips, toes, noses, ears, and other delicate tissues forever marking them like tattoos commemorating a tragic past. The smuggler went to prison.

Two months earlier, I told authorities at the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge that they had migrants coming their way. U.S. border enforcement was pushing migrants to the west. The people at the wildlife refuge already knew that. Photos from wildlife cameras captured images of migrants drinking putrid water from natural water holes. Even though they knew and even though their regional staff told them not to, the authorities denied the request of Humane Borders Inc. to place water stations filled with potable water at strategic locations to prevent migrant deaths. Preserving human lives was not part of their mission, and dealing with migrants was too political for them.

We weren’t the police in the desert; we were the firefighters. I was the founder and first president of Humane Borders Inc. All 26 of that group had walked very close to one of the proposed water stations. A simple barrel of potable water beneath a thirty-foot-high blue flag would have saved their lives. That flag would have been seen more than five miles away. Luis Alberto Urrea immortalized this story in the bestselling book “The Devil’s Highway.”

This book is dedicated to those 14 who died and to those 12 (even the smuggler) who were forever injured by the harsh Arizona sun, the lack of empathy by public administrators, the foreknowledge of policy makers, and the exclusion of faith communities and civil society from critical policy discourse. No consent of the governed can exist when public policy decisions exclude the governed. This book is also dedicated to those who all these years later want to reform U.S. immigration policies.

This is personal. The deaths and disfigurements of those 26, the subsequent international attention to that story, and the projection of Humane Borders into the media and public policy discourse in several countries has indelibly shaped my life. I have written about these things in Creating Humane Borders: a migration ethic. This story will continue until the U.S. reforms policies that systematically kill and abuse migrants.

Now, as we approach the 25th anniversary of those tragic days in 2001, I offer a way forward based upon experience, knowledge, and vision. As a social ethicist and political scientist, I feel I have much to offer. We are a country publicly at war with our neighbors’ emigrants: undocumented, refugees, asylum applicants, those we call DACAs (deferred action for childhood arrivals), and others. Now, a new discourse and a new politics are necessary. The new discourse must be located somewhere between open borders and a border that resembles the border between North and South Korea. The U.S. must give up its idea of controlling the border, but it can adapt to it. Is that happening? No. President Donald J. Trump in July signed a bill adding billions more dollars for an enforcement-only strategy. The current budget for the failed enforcement-only strategy is more than the budget for many of the world’s militaries.

Thousands of migrant deaths later, it’s time to talk and to act. Of course it is time for resistance, but it is also time for persistence. We need critical thinking. We need passionate protests. The young people who sat in Woolworth’s in the civil rights era were too young to have been experienced public policy geniuses, but they were moral giants. Making public policy changes is not difficult. To make change, simply hold up your arms and point. Announce what is wrong. Ask people around you who wants to join me on Thursday? Meet them and do something.

Pointing, naming, joining, and doing things is necessary but not enough. Similar efforts must be underway in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. National economies, human rights, and human dignity call out for new ideas and energy. People around the world need to point to the U.S. and motivate its people to reform immigration policies.

INTRODUCTION

Public discourse requires study and preparation. The bottom line: we want to change immigration policies. To achieve policy changes, we must examine ourselves, learn about the policies we want to change, imagine those changes, and develop a vision of who we want to be and what we want the border to represent.

We will not have the passion to change policies until we develop and nurture our empathy for the people who are migrating and respect for their countries of origin. We will not be successful in our passionate desires to reform policies until we increase our knowledge about immigration policies and how they shape our social, cultural, and economic lives. We need concepts (only a few) about the changes we want to see and why. We need to set the course and direction. Congress will make the sausage. We will need to look closely at the specific groups of people who want to live and work in the United States of America. Finally, some sort of moral vision is necessary to evaluate the choices we make on the journey.

Human migration in the western hemisphere has been ongoing since time immemorial. It’s how we all got to this place. Most scholars tell us that indigenous peoples and what we call modern nations owe their existence to migration perhaps 30,000 years before Asians and Europeans. Settler colonialism must, of course, be resoundingly denounced. My point is that people have always been on the move. Nations and their authorities have responded to migrations with permissive attitudes, strict enforcement, and sometimes general indifference. Very good histories of migrations and enforcement have been written. I do not review those here. Suffice it to say that an all-in or all-out approach is ill advised. Long before Ellis Island was a federal immigration portal, it was a public health facility needed to prevent the spread of disease in New York City. Some rational restrictions are, well, rational. We do need laws. We do need borders. Open borders is not a workable concept. But we don’t need the kinds of borders and concepts we have.

We want immigrants, workers, visitors, businesspeople, and students to come. We want families to be made whole. We want our economies to flourish and for our people and the people of the world to flourish in the deserts here and in the deserts far away.

The U.S. has a group of horribly failed border policies and a group of horribly failed law enforcement practices that lack imagination and are in desperate need of reform. The policies we have are often implemented with little or no judgement about consequences. The U.S. has undertaken policy reforms many times, most notably in 1952, 1965, 1986, and 1996. Since 1952, however, most of the so-called reforms ended up further restricting migration, reducing human rights, destroying families, and, quite literally, killing people. That must change.

This book offers a conceptual framework for reimagining migration policies and their enforcement from a normative human rights perspective. That is, no reform will be adequate unless it incorporates diversity, equity, and inclusion. DEI is woven into the fabric of the U.S. We need to expand human rights and treat people with dignity, respect, and yes, even love.

I’ve lived with migration all my life. I’ve studied it. My political science doctoral studies focused on immigration and the contributions made through faith-based groups. I’ve created and led four faith-based nonprofit organizations dedicated to removing the suffering of migrants and advocating for changes that would remove migrants from the perils of migration, including death.

The day in 2006 when I received Mexico’s prestigious national human rights award from then-President Felipe Calderon in Los Pinos (often called Mexico’s White House), Mexico City, I looked to him on the dais from the podium and said it was time to share the resources and opportunities of the western hemisphere. He knew. He had undocumented relatives living in the U.S. What I said then remains true 20 years later. We still do not have the imagination for immigration reform nor a plan for the implementation of new policies. The plan I offer in this book is an attempt at a long-term Marshall Plan for the development of western hemisphere economies and nations.

Reform has never been more urgent than in the second term of Donald J. Trump. He is wrecking the economies and oppressing the peoples of many countries. Never in history has a U.S. president tried to soften the U.S. dollar, impose tariffs, and reduce the workforce. We are living in a time of xenophobia marked by a nationalistic fear of others directed at persons who do not belong to Trump’s version of identity politics, a politics that is no longer even aware of human rights. Not only is “us and them” used to distinguish America First people from other countries, but Trump is also creating divisions among the people who live in the United States.

“Us and them” is not a feature of human rights. Human rights are universal. The concept of human rights is at least about dignity, respect, and, hopefully, mutuality. Today, though, it is rarely the focus of public policy. When Trump uses the word “we” in speeches, he is not referring to citizens of the U.S., and especially not those who reside inside the U.S. – he’s speaking to his billionaire buddies and others who benefit from his tax cuts.

Americans usually expect at least some sort of fairness based on individuality and common interest. Unfortunately, the zenith of human rights in the U.S. has passed. Hopefully, there will be another, perhaps now. Human rights language is almost sterile today. Human rights has become a sterile concept in international relations. It is sterile in a world in which markets and governments are colluding and tilting toward fascism, authoritarianism, and in the case of the U.S., toward patrimonialism – to be precise. The voice in which I write in 2025 is one that is non-market, non-governmental, and non-identity politics-oriented, based on my lifelong observations. However, reform can include market incentives, government initiatives, and the recognition of the identities of groups of people.

I grew up in west Texas in the 1950s and ’60s when farmers, ranchers, oil and gas producers, service organizations, and highway builders were all dependent upon migrant labor to get their work done. It was the time of the so-called Great Society, the time of the Baby Boomers, war, and a burgeoning economy. Politicians would occasionally tinker with immigration policies, something done during all presidential administrations. Republicans and Democrats alike were finding new ways to include, exclude, and/or benefit from migration. Good policies and bad policies emerged from these efforts. The point is always to make good policies.

It is commonplace to ask, “What radicalized you?” In my case, it was my family, my church, my education, and my life experiences, including employment in many sectors of the economy.

My mother was the secretary for the high school principal in my hometown of Big Spring. The school had some 2,500 students, at least 30 percent Latino. Even if I wasn’t in a particular teacher’s classroom, most of the teachers knew who I was because they would see me around my mother. My father’s formative experience was as a member of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. He trained and served from the day after the war was declared until V-J Day, which marked the end of the war. The OSS became the CIA after the war. Among the many things he did was work in an intelligence group with the mission to repatriate the Philippines following the Japanese occupation.

Watching Filipinos find home was a satisfaction he conveyed to me in one story after another. His satisfaction was born of his empathy. Some Filipinos were resettled away from their communities of origin, but the war in the Pacific had almost no displaced persons, who were a common feature in Europe. He came home and began working for the Veterans Administration. I sat on the laps of men who rode with Teddy Roosevelt, and I learned from them concepts of country, nation, freedom, and that most arrogant concept: American. From an early age, my father introduced me to many U.S. Latino war heroes. My father was not very progressive. He did not meet a black person until he was 15 years old. Still, he recognized that a country means everyone.

His specialty was bombsight photography, which put him aboard many, many aircraft. He had his ship torpedoed by a German submarine in the Indian Ocean. He survived seven-and-a-half days on a life raft with some 40 other young men. Some were lost to shark attacks and dehydration. During the war, he spent days on remote atolls without water. So many of his stories, the influences of which will emerge in this book, live on in me.

Immediately after high school I worked at state, private, city, county, and federal hospitals, including in the same VA hospital as my father during the Vietnam War. As an adult, I got to meet the veterans. Again, many of them were Latinos. During the mid-1970s, I received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism and Religion. I worked on a contract through the then-Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to develop a model called Comprehensive Services for Children in Crisis. The program was sort of like 911 for anything related to the children’s wellbeing. I spent a lot of time with men and women who had master’s degrees in social work.

At the age of 23, I became a commercial construction superintendent in Dallas. I built 13 restaurants and some large public schools. My crews finished more than 250,000 square feet of Class A office space through the years. I worked in construction while attending classes to become an ordained minister, working side-by-side with many Latinos.

Beginning in 1980, I entered full-time ministry. I served six congregations over 33.3 years. My first church was in Freeport, Texas. It was noted for having created La Escolita (the Little School) after World War II. Several public schoolteachers attending that congregation and teachers at the Catholic church a few blocks away got together and began teaching the migrant kids in town so the children could keep up with their regular class assignments. The Escolita program became a model for other programs, and together they became a pilot program for the Texas Education Agency. The Texas Education Agency programs in turn became a model for the federal program known as Head Start while the migrant-friendly President Lyndon B. Johnson was in office. Change can start small. Admittedly, though, it takes time.

While serving other congregations I participated ecumenically and with others of my tribe to help migrants. Because of my construction experience, I directed work groups that built shelters for migrants seeking political asylum in the south of Texas. Later, in Tucson, Arizona, I served a congregation with extensive historic ties to migrants. There, I founded and served as the first president of Humane Borders.

Through the years I participated in direct service provision, especially in the form of humanitarian assistance to migrants. Most notably was the creation of Humane Borders, which makes water available to migrants risking their lives crossing the border in the Arizona desert. Because I was engaged in that, and because I was both a pastor and an academic, I was frequently invited to preach and teach in congregations and lecture in universities in the United States and Mexico. I went on to participate in congressional hearings and in frequent meetings with the top officials of Customs and Border Protection. Additionally, I participated in numerous news and educational venues with activist groups, union groups, faith-based groups, and even legal service providers.

Every person has some sort of connection to the people who have crossed borders, made their homes among us, and made contributions to our shared life in the United States. Based on those experiences, many have come to have significant understanding of and empathy for migrants. I turn now to just one of hundreds of possible stories about migration that hopefully will invite the reader to think more deeply about migration.

Two carloads of Guatemalan nationals crossed from Sonora into Arizona some 20 years ago. These migrants were led by a coyote (or guia, smuggler, pollero, guide) who was supposed to pay members of the Tohono O’odham Nation for the privilege of crossing the reservation. He didn’t pay.

Sixty miles into the U.S., a gun battle erupted at the boundary of the Tohono O’odham Nation and the Ironwood Forest National Monument at a place called Little Ranch. The land there is a stunningly beautiful, very remote area of the borderlands. One can look west and see tens of thousands of giant saguaro cactus rising from pristine desert. Jumping cholla, Palo Verde trees, prickly pear cactus, and creosote make the scene lush. That’s deceptive. There is no water to be found. I knew that area well because we had a water station located a few feet from the barbed wire gate separating the reservation and the monument.

Despite years of effort on our part, the Tohono O’odham would not allow us to operate on their 2.8 million acres, an area larger than the state of Connecticut. As a result, at the direction of federal law enforcement agents, we put that station on the boundary line and similarly in other locations to encircle the reservation’s forbidden lands. If migrants could get that far, they could live.

During the gunfight, a .223 bullet grazed the chest of a young woman. She slumped onto the man beside her and came close to bleeding to death. Most likely the gunmen were Tohono O’odham, though that was never confirmed. Three Guatemalans died. Five got away, though all of them were apprehended by Border Patrol soon after the shooting.

The media were on it. I was horrified. Despite all you have heard or read, the shooting of migrants rarely happens. Even then, it is almost always drug related. Working with the Guatemalan Consul General, I called for an impromptu memorial service at the site of the killings. Following a press release, announcements in churches that morning, and a few phone calls, we formed a caravan to the site. Federal land management law enforcement accompanied us at a respectful distance.

Body fluids discolored the ancient sands where cowboys and Indians, priests and rangers, and finally settlers with cattle once roamed. The stained sands were all that remained of the Guatemalans who had passed that way. Activist mourners created a makeshift altar/sanctuary/altar of rocks and sticks. Prayers were offered. Those in attendance made statements. News cameras were rolling. Microphones were everywhere. Tears. Anger. Disbelief. Resolve.

Was border policy working? No. Were other countries shocked? Yes. Were the locals concerned? Absolutely. Were activists animated? Again, yes.

The borderlands are dangerous and dramatic places where so-called civilizations try to impose their version of reality on a desert where people evaporate and the soils swallow their blood. The borderlands are also vast, beautiful, and deadly.

But this story did not end there. Weeks later, the Consul General of Guatemala called to see if I could pick up two of the people involved in that shooting from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention in Tucson. I was given some papers from the federal agents. The young woman came out the door first. She was wearing new sweatpants and a sweatshirt that was roughly cut down at the neckline to expose the slash across her rib cage and sternum and keep the shirt from chafing the wound.

The man followed her out of detention. He was wearing the same blood-soaked blue jeans he was wearing weeks before when she nearly bled out on him. That was at least a biohazard for the staff, and to this day I recall this because I am ashamed of the ICE agents that couldn’t find or buy some clothing for him.

We drove to my church. Women volunteers huddled with the woman to comfort her. The wound was not as healed as it should be. Having worked extensively in hospitals, I called a physician in my church. He had attended to migrants through the backdoor of his practice for decades. He and I dressed her wound with items from my trauma kit. I drove the man, who spoke broken English to a Target store and bought him clothing. I later learned that he was the guia – the man who was guiding the Guatemalans through the Indian reservation. He was the man who didn’t pay. We drove to Tucson International Airport. After talking to a TSA agent and the airline company, he boarded a plane to some destination on the East Coast. It was all legal, though it wouldn’t be today, when masked goons would instantly snatch him and put him in removal proceedings.

Back at the church, following phone calls with the consul and after receiving calls from people I didn’t know, two different men showed up to take the woman. She knew neither one. There was terror in her eyes, but she finally decided to go with one with assurances from the consul, who appeared at the church around 10 p.m. The men were part of the network of people who smuggled Guatemalan migrants into the U.S.

None of this should ever have happened. But what is the system? Border Patrol was doing some of the things it should have. Governments here and far away were doing some of the things they should have. The semi-sovereign Tohono O’odham Nation leaders were sort of doing what they thought they should, though they certainly should have done more. Humanitarians were doing what they are called to do. Land managers implemented their decisions about water stations and our safety. Media were behaving predictably. Still, it is a tragedy in the sense that this story could have been very different.

One of the things you learn as a pastor is that no story is ever over.

Years later, the story reemerged. I took a group of students from a university in upstate New York to the site of the murder near the barbed wire gate. As we huddled around a water station sharing stories, we started walking around a bit. We found things underneath a Palo Verde tree. Binoculars. A device known as a speed-loader for rapidly putting six bullets into a revolver. On close examination, the cartridges in the speed-loader were hand-loads. The brass hulls of cartridges previously fired had been reloaded. The Border Patrol has lots of money to buy new bullets. That means the items we found were not left by a Border Patrol agent. Other items like food wrappers and crushed plastic water bottles indicated someone had been there for a long-time watching migrants and members of the Tohono O’odham Nation come and go, possibly looking out for Border Patrol and Bureau of Land Management law enforcement.

Two of the young men in the student group had stereotypical short haircuts and no facial hair. They were fresh scrubbed from the American middle class and particularly interested in hearing me talk about border law enforcement. I could see them thinking, “If we could just figure out how best to determine the good guys from the bad guys, we could solve all the problems with appropriate law enforcement.” Conversations ensued. Finally, I raised my voice and challenged them: “If you’re going to put on the uniform of the United States in the deserts here or the deserts far away, you better fucking embody the values of the American people.” In 2025, I want to speak even more forcefully to many, many in this country. I want to speak to those who are supporting Trump and to those who are standing around wondering what to do next.

To the surprise of the young men’s professor and myself, those two students went back to their university and made a documentary movie promoting human rights on the U.S. southwest border. That’s what this old preacher calls conversion! We need a country to stop what it is thinking, saying, and doing about immigration.

The values of the U.S. body politic should not be racism, classism, and militarism. We need a new politics, a new discourse, a new way of living and being in this world with neighbors, countries, cultures, religions. Immigration policies are the No. 1 agenda in the U.S. at this moment. The following chapters offer some ideas about how we can move toward a new kind of immigration politics that will serve this country.

The organization of this work is simple. Without some degree of empathy, the ability to care about others and social organization, there can be no immigration reform. For that matter, some sense about other people is the basis for all politics. So, there’s a chapter on empathy. Second, I raise the question of where is the border? Sure, it is an imaginary line separating things like jurisdiction, authority, and power, but is it really? The concept of a border is driving the work in consulates, boardrooms and detention centers, in the streets of major U.S. cities., in nursing homes and restaurants, on roofs under construction, on farms, in fields – but also in universities, research centers, and hospitals. This is a country of immigrants, and we need to know each other and work together.

The central chapter in this book is an attempt to offer a few concepts that could radically change how we handle immigration in the U.S. Great changes can come from manipulating only a few variables. Undocumented people need documents. Okay, give them documents. People want to work. Okay, give them papers to work. How we do those things should be shaped by the kind of country we want to be.

To supplement those ideas, I have included a chapter on terms and talking points. Anyone working in this policy area should know some data and know that the prevailing interpretation of data can be changed. I added a chapter that includes the texts of 86 TikTok videos I produced with friends in Mexico City to suggest that when speaking in public, promoters of immigration reform need only have a few concepts and a willingness to speak about the imagination needed to bring about immigration reform. The last full chapter is about volunteering. Anyone, anywhere, can help move us all toward immigration reform. Finally, a conclusion. And the conclusion is simple: Any revision or reform to public policy needs some sort of values-driven perspective so that the public can evaluate whether the new ideas are good. The absence of a moral perspective on policies and expenditures leads to disaster and defeat.

REFORM REQUIRES EMPATHY

“In my work with the defendants (at the Nuremberg Trials 1945-1949) I was searching for the nature of evil, and I now think I have come close to defining it: a lack of empathy. It’s the one characteristic that connects all the defendants. A genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow men. Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy.”

– Captain G.M. Gilbert, U.S. Army psychologist assigned to watching defendants at the Nuremberg trials.

President Donald J. Trump has no empathy for others – the policies he pursues are pure evil. He offers paper towels to Puerto Ricans following a hurricane and alligators for guards in his new detention center in Florida. Some Latinos voted for him. Now many feel betrayed.

Trump is using fear to breed anxiety about others. Every day he names bad human behaviors and associates them with migrants. Every day he extends his disdain for migrants to all people with brown skin. Every day he offers the security of the surveillance state and the immigration enforcement power of the U.S. as a means of reducing the anxiety at the same time he produces even more spiraling anxiety through legacy media and social media.

A new politics can emerge if enough citizens use faith in each other to produce hope for all of us, a hope that will not disappoint. Anthropologically, historically, biologically, we’re all one. We can be one politically. That’s what the American experiment is all about. The U.S. has no place for all the otherness that Trump is creating. Philosophers call that “alterity”: otherness. Empathy is the answer to alterity. Empathy will enable us to reform immigration policies.

Responding to alterity requires a moral alternation, a turning, in which one changes heart, mind, soul, ideology, theology, or whatever matters in one’s life. One must change to an openness to others.

All major religions figured some things out over time about divine love and human love. They promote love in general even though they draw circles and build walls at times. Religious and philosophical traditions teach us that even those we have despised are ultimately our neighbors. One’s country of origin hardly seems like a sufficient basis for a radical refusal of basic human rights and dignity. The country you are from should not determine your standing in our judicial system. Punishment should not be followed by banishment the way the Trump administration is sending deportees to Third World countries.

In the United States, we say “E pluribus, unum” – “From the many, one.” And, even within that concept, each of us still reserves that which makes us distinctive. Is the U.S. a tossed salad? A quilt? A melting pot? It doesn’t matter. We may not be able to agree on a metaphor, but the first 250 years of the United States have shown that progress can be made, hope can be nurtured, a unity that enriches all of us can be achieved. One major wave of migration happens, we adjust, absorb, and move forward.

Ancient Jews figured out the centrality of love of God and love of neighbors. Jesus taught that even those who are despised by the majorities are neighbors. Moderns speak of fellow travelers on Starship Earth. Whatever guide(s) one follows, a change is required in how a particular individual feels and thinks about people who are in one detail or another different.

Stories speak to whatever it is that makes us human. Empathy is essential to humanity. In this chapter, I will offer some stories that invite us to use imagination to reform immigration policies.

Five young men from Guanajuato, Mexico, got out of their old white car and began walking to our job shack back in 1978. My boss, Will, and I were supervising the construction of a 58,000-square-foot elementary school on about 10 acres in a new community just north of Dallas. Most of our work was subcontracted with other companies.

Will and I wore tool belts just like everyone else, but our job included total coordination and supervision. Our large company had hired the young men after determining no local people were willing to do the hard work. I greeted the men and managed them. Our company was once a union shop. At the time, we had union subcontractors and non-union employees and supervisors. We paid these men above the union rate for laborers plus vacation and healthcare. It was a good and fair thing for everyone.

It turned out that they only spoke Spanish. I had acquired quite a bit of Spanish in junior high and high school, plus at some work experiences. They had good Social Security numbers, which made hiring them legal in the 1970s. I learned that an enterprising Black pastor in a nearby city gave or sold the men the Social Security numbers of his church members. Everyone was gaming the system. The employees got what they needed to start working. The church members got extra Social Security contributions to their accounts. We hired much-needed employees. Win-win-win.

Each morning the men would park their car way at the far end of the acreage where we were working. They would raise the hood on the car, tinker around for a minute, then close the hood. I thought they had a problem with the car, but what they were doing was putting their burritos on top of the car’s hot engine manifold to keep them warm until lunch. Ingenious. I asked them about it after a few days, and they showed me. “Is it okay to do this?” “Of course,” I laughed, adding, “If you have some for me.” So I got a warm burrito every day. I didn’t want to take advantage of these generous new friends, so I gave them beer money at the end of the week. They all smiled as big as they could. We got along well.

These men did work that we couldn’t hire anyone else to do. Another superintendent for our company had made a mistake and put an enormous, reinforced steel foundation beam in the wrong location. These guys had to jackhammer out the concrete, clean the steel, and help us set new concrete forms to pour a new beam in the correct location for the huge room we called the cafetorium. That room would serve as a cafeteria at lunch and auditorium the rest of the time.

Everyone was happy when we had the concrete repaired and the new structural steel was in place. I ended up spending every day with these men for just over a month. I don’t know where they went when the job was done, or even if they stayed with our company, but I started thinking then that the arrangement we had for them to work for us was somehow wonderful. On reflection, I still think it is.

In the 1960s, I watched some high school graduates go off to Vietnam while others headed to Canada to oppose the war, but a large group went to Saudia Arabia to work for Aramco in the oil fields. There, they could work for two years, then bring home the money they made tax-free. Willing employers and willing workers like these who are treated fairly should be a major goal of any immigration reform proposal.

Every summer of my high school years, hundreds of my church friends from around the state would gather for a week at Texas Christian University to learn about the world through the eyes of the church. We’d visit social welfare organizations, clean up parks, study about the many social issues of the ’60s, worship, sing, play, and learn. Undocumented migrant kids who were members of the congregations in the southernmost part of Texas would come. They were migrant farm workers, but unlike the Evangelicals we read about today, we brought them into our lives. We learned from them. I recall one kid I met at least two times saying, “I became a Christian. Now I’m learning how to be a Christian in America.” I hope he never did it the way it’s practiced here now. Today, Evangelicals, especially Christian nationalists, have absolutely nothing to teach us about immigration.

In the summer of 1974, as a student in graduate divinity school, I served as one of the leaders of a special church camp our congregations held each year. The congregations swept up many special needs kids from the streets in their various communities, and they brought in a large number of migrant farmworker children as well. I only learned of the camp and the schedule for me to be there a few days before it happened. I asked one of our church members about it. He smiled at me because he thought the church was doing a great job, and because he wanted to tell me exactly how it was. He said, “We’re going to give these kids the opportunity to sleep on clean sheets for the first time.” Exaggerated? Unfortunately, not that much. Hot showers, three meals a day, swimming, playing, friendships – it was a great and new experience for many. It’s called sharing.

In 1970, just a few days after high school graduation, I began working in Big Spring State Mental Hospital. I went on to work for other hospitals. At the state hospital were many people diagnosed with schizophrenia who came from the El Paso area – so many that the clinical director told us he thought someone was planting schizophrenia seeds there. Turns out that the tin smelters were emitting so much toxic material that it was affecting the mental health of people across the El Paso-Juárez valley. Any epidemiologist will tell you that there is usually a reason for one group or another showing signs of being different. There’s no such thing as what Trump calls a “shithole” country or race.

I vigorously protested the Vietnam War during my high school years, but I did so civilly because I wanted to graduate. Just before graduation seniors had what was called the reading of the senior will, a comical and serious awards ceremony. My friend was the photographer for the newspaper and our yearbook. I hung out with him and photobombed a bunch of his photos that were published. At the reading of the senior will, I was “willed” an 8x10 glossy photograph of myself.

I was also given the American Legion Award for Citizenship. That confused me: Why would veterans reward me for opposing the war? I walked to my mother’s office. She told me that the teachers had voted for me to receive that award. She said that was their way of quietly protesting the war, too. Today, like then, huge numbers of Americans are just waiting for leaders to step forward and show us how to proceed to immigration reform and reform in many other policy areas. Without knowing, I led the adults.

My early life experiences led me to think about domestic public policy. Hospitals, church camps, construction companies – the entire fabric of our social life is shaped dramatically by choices large and small groups make about how we should live and be in this world. Do we make the world safe for humans to flourish? Do we share our resources with those less fortunate? Do we abuse others with our hiring practices? Do we express empathy and show gratitude for labors contributed?

In January of 1986 I became deeply involved in humanitarian work and political advocacy on behalf of the hundreds of thousands (and even millions) of people who were fleeing Central America (and Mexico). They were escaping in large part because of the policies of the United States, which was prosecuting wars in Central America and destabilizing the Mexican economy.

Author Upton Sinclair famously said, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” Many are the times when a civil society organization or church has invited me and some spokesperson for the Border Patrol to engage in a debate or question-and-answer session so their members could see “both sides” of the issue. What they should have done was invite their member of Congress to a town hall to defend his or her vote on the policy that created the two sides.

The various “sides” have been with us for decades. The wars in Central America were proxy wars. The U.S. aided and abetted dictatorships and corporations and sent signals to community actors that the land and all it produced belonged to the U.S. and its commercial interests. The wars were major drivers of the migration phenomenon. Mexico’s government refers to the migration flow (flujo migratorio) as a natural phenomenon. It’s better to understand it as a result of U.S.-instigated political, economic, and military actions during the 1980s. Variants on those wars result in migration behaviors today that are directly tied to U.S. hegemony in the region.

So many things influence migration. From 1986-2015 or so, there was a huge migration to the U.S. from Mexico. The U.S. Baby Boomers were fully in the workforce, but Mexico had had its own baby boom, and millions of young men needed jobs. It was a “natural,” if you will, for many of them to make a run to the northern border to participate in the booming U.S. economy. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) just put it into high gear.

Faith communities and civil society responded. My mentor would raise money and buy a truckload of rice at the Houston ship docks. Each truck was driven to south Texas where the rice was distributed to shelters housing refugees, asylum seekers, and the poorest of the poor in the U.S. Undocumented Mexican migrants would rest up in the shelters and make their way to their destinations. At the time, the four counties on the tip of Texas made up the poorest standard metropolitan statistical area in the U.S. Some years later, I raised money and shipped 40,000-pound loads of pinto beans from west Texas farms. Rice and beans are a staple of the Latino diet, and together they are a rich source of protein. Rice and beans can be stored without refrigeration and cooked with little effort.

Religion is an important aspect of the migration. Today, up to 35 percent of the U.S. Catholic Church is comprised of Latinos, many of whom are undocumented. The Catholic Church – at least in the United States – has offered a lot of help to migrating people. Perhaps it can be seen as constituency service, but it is also a focus of the Catholic social mission that is focused on all people.

The archbishop of Brownsville created a shelter called Casa Oscar Romero, named for the bishop in Chiapas, Mexico, who was martyred and later canonized as a saint. There, Catholics, and many others fed and housed some 500 people each night. Many were fed with rice and beans from my denomination.

Bishop Fitzpatrick was strongly pressured to stop his work of hospitality to strangers. He had two 4x8-footpieces of plywood painted and placed at the entrance to the shelter. One had the words of Emma Lazarus found on the Statue of Liberty. The other had the words from Matthew 25. He told reporters, politicians, and Border Patrol that those two sets of words summed up his politics. He stood his ground and helped the migrants.

Not to be outdone by symbols, the United States Border Patrol built a 40-foot-tall World War II-style watchtower along the fence of Casa Oscar Romero. Using telephoto lenses, agents photographed migrants and hospitality workers in hopes of aiding future prosecutions. The public was at odds with the Border Patrol agents, who were not eager to assist with providing food, water, clothing, welcome, healthcare, or comfort to the imprisoned. They failed the test of Matthew 25. What would today’s protests be without all the cameras – on both sides?

In 1995, Mexico dramatically devalued the Mexican peso. Mexican authorities operating a prison in Matamoros learned that my colleague in ministry was storing and distributing rice and beans. The authorities were trying to feed the prisoners in Mexico. When the peso was devalued, the Mexican government did not increase the budget for food. So, a delegation from the Mexican prison went to the pastor to persuade him to help. What they didn’t know was that he had spent five years in a Cuban prison as a prisoner because of his anti-Castro preaching. The last thing he wanted to do was leave the U.S. and spend time in a foreign prison. But he went. Why? Because he had been a highly motivated pastor all his life, and because he was full of empathy: His diet for the five years he was imprisoned was based on pasta. He could feel for the prisoners who wanted simply to eat.

A visit to the borderlands is one of the best ways to find out if you have empathy for migrants. We sat on the bank of the Rio Grande River in south Texas one day and watched as Border Patrol helicopter pilots steered their craft toward migrants crossing the river like a cattleman steers a herd.

At a checkpoint near Yuma, Arizona, a Latino Border Patrol agent stuck his head into the window of the car and asked, “U.S. everyone?” There were six of us. I replied, “No, one is Canadian.” He said, “We’re all cousins. Have a nice day.” He wasn’t checking nationalities – he was profiling.

In 2000, religious leaders and concerned people in Tucson read about migrants dying in their part of the desert. They and I met and founded Humane Borders, a social-welfare nonprofit organization, to provide water to migrants and advocate for changes in U.S. policies that put the lives of migrants in danger.

At the peak, we had 106 water stations deployed. We hosted 15,000 volunteers over a 10-year period. The volunteers would replenish water in water stations, pick up migrant debris, and walk the trails of the migrants. After walking for an hour, they began to develop an understanding of what the migrants were enduring. In the early 2000s, a migrant would walk four or five days.

Someone living 1,000 miles from the border can learn about migration and nurture empathy without visiting the border with only some reading, watching, and studying. I sat in my living room recliner and watched Mexico’s then-president, Vicente Fox, address a joint session of the U.S. Congress in August of 2001. I wrote down a list of five things he needed to cover in his speech. He spoke about all five of those things and added two of his own.

As a former executive for Coca-Cola and having spent a lot of time in the United States, Fox understood the migration. One can nurture empathy by keeping up with the news. In this case, a matter of days later, on Sept. 11, 2001, blowback from U.S. policies overseas was responsible for the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. If the U.S. had empathy for the regimes around the world the U.S. was trying to manipulate, that attack would have never happened. That day, all immigration was redefined as a national security matter. Redefining human problems can quickly take away any empathy that might emerge in the public. Border Patrol agents just redefine problems. They renamed detention centers by calling them processing centers to skirt the requirements of the law.

Political leaders and those who comment upon them do everything imaginable to destroy empathy among the public. Most journalists are left of center, but legacy media (and arguably most media) are inherently conservative. I’ve interacted with rabid anti-immigrant voices like Arizona’s former Sheriff Joe Arpaio, CNN’s Lou Dobbs, Fox News personalities Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly, the so-called think tank FAIR (Federation of Americans for Immigration Reform). In the 2000s, politicians like Tom Tancredo did all he could to diminish any concern for migrants and focus on border security. He denounced water stations. The Rev. Pat Roberston sent a film crew to spend time with me in the desert. On his syndicated television show, he accused me of aiding cartels and promoting an invasion from Mexico. It can be hard to maintain empathy for migrants while receiving death threats for doing humanitarian things.

Nonetheless, the story of empathy is easy. Survey your surroundings. Look for those who are weeping, sorrowful, hurting, marginalized, hungry, thirsty. Then do something about it. Empathy doesn’t have to come from religion. We can use modern language and be equally motivated. Some have said we’re all in this boat together. Others take a Star Trek approach and speak of how we’re all living on Starship Earth. It doesn’t matter where your motivation comes from, but it is there as a resource which you can call upon anytime.

REFORM REQUIRES KNOWLEDGE

No real logic exists at the border. Is there something obvious we’re supposed to do? Close it? Open it? Manage it? How do we decide? It’s a lot like the Cold War. Most of the time, no one knows just what to do. Pre-emptive strike? Hold the line? Mutually assured destruction?

Media alert people early in the morning via breaking news that a major event or crisis has emerged. Later, officials respond. By 4:00p.m., reporters on site inform the public the crisis is averted. Whew! What a relief! The emotional rollercoaster is no longer there to ride. It’s over. This recurring cycle breeds quiescence in the public. We were held hostage until the next crisis.

The next day, new crisis, related, but new. The border news has the volatility of the stock market with no end in sight. Literally no end. Trump adding billions to border enforcement promises only more crises. No one knows where it is going. In a macabre way, many Americans like it this way. It prefers the options given by manufactured choice. Starbucks is a success because every morning, it sells satisfaction for individual consumer choices.

The Border Patrol is a consumer of U.S. border policies. They get a mission, a union, guns and equipment. They get job security from the inexorable flow of humanity from the dependent south toward and into the co-dependent north. Agents don’t have to think about it or reflect upon it until a reporter sticks a microphone in their face. Then, it’s like interviewing baseball players after the game.

The narrative is always the same. We/They are/were good/bad. Conditions were good/bad. Referees were good/bad. At the end of the day, we/they did/didn’t do O.K.

The story citizens know about the border is the story told by journalists, pundits, broadcasters, politicians, public administrators, and other media personalities and experts. It’s a story about numbers of migrants and federal – and sometimes state – law enforcement. The story never changed – until Donald Trump decided that immigration was the number one issue facing the United States. We were living a story of body counts reminiscent of the Vietnam War. Now, we are living a story of symbolic politics, street theatre, and spectacle.

Some incident will occur at the border or in the interior. The media personalities run to the Border Patrol. Agents trot out their technologies used to aid their work: sensors, cameras, blimps, helicopters, all-terrain vehicles, horses, and night vision goggles. The Border Patrol started on horseback equipped with no more than a cowboy out of the Wild West. Today, fully militarized, the agents talk about disrupt groups, Border Search Trauma and Rescue agents, liaisons and memorandums of understanding with city and county law enforcement, and video links to immigration courts. Now, they add the Department of Defense.

Even with all the new equipment and technologies, law enforcement fails to accomplish the mission any better now than it did 25 or 40 years ago. Congress and presidential administrations have wildly scaled up the capacities and funding necessary to do the job, but the results speak for themselves: nothing that law enforcement has done has scaled up efficiency or effectiveness. There is no system for “doing” immigration enforcement.

One distinct, single way of looking at the migration or at U.S. policies does not exist. No magic system can be invented that will address all the issues along the border or in the interior of the U.S. No set of unifying assumptions can be agreed upon that will enable policy makers to pass a comprehensive immigration policy. Trying to take the little ideas and piecemeal assemble a new policy is not a good way to proceed with migration policy reform.

The last 40 years of tinkering with migration policy that way has failed – miserably. The answer comes from living with the migration, living in the migration, being in the migration in such a way that we can discern a new vision. Instead of inductive reasoning or deductive reasoning, the path forward is what philosophers call abductive reasoning: living with the problem. The final criterion for evaluating a new way of doing migration is a moral vision to determine if we can perceive, behave, and become a better country.

Carl von Clausewitz famously observed that war was politics pursued by other means. The U.S. border with Mexico is an interminable way or stasis: U.S. politicians, afraid of pursuing a change in politics, instead are continually pursuing preparations including fundraising and taking positions in announcements on the internet.

The war at the border is a low-intensity war. About the time of 9/11, a friend of mine called a phone number associated with one border issue or another. The call was answered in the Office of Low-Intensity Warfare at the Pentagon. Military, military contractors, and Border Patrol make use of remote patches of the desert leased by the City of Tucson and Pima County in Southern Arizona and other places near the border to keep upgrading the technology employed for border enforcement. Surveillance systems, drones, and sensors are tested. Migrants unwittingly trip these devices or unknowingly become the subjects of the testing.

The Border Patrol wanted to downplay how deadly the border is for migrants, so it introduced pepper ball guns, rubber bullets, and other nonlethal weapons. But the idea of pushing migrants into the most inhospitable terrain could never be discussed no matter how deadly it became. According to the government, everything was the fault of the smugglers. Trade treaties and now tariffs add to the foment of low-intensity warfare.

The border-media phenomenon has become a commodity. The border promotes the media. The media “produce” “the border.” The commodity is sold to the American public through advertising.

The border, then, has become a political spectacle. It really is not a thing. It is, rather, a drive to maintain fictions repeated and rehearsed repeatedly. The border as a product satisfies no one. Some reporters want to dig deeper. BP agents just want to do their job. Politicians purport to solve problems. Tens of billions of dollars are spent on enforcement, on ports of entry, on trade, on tourism, but no single interest group’s vision for a future ever prevails. Many voices will be needed to reform policies, and I want to point out that the Border Patrol is, and should be, only one small voice.

A pastry chef I met in Telluride, Colorado, wanted his low-cost guest workers. The contractors I know want their framing carpenters, concrete finishers, and roofers. Hospitality managers want their service industry employees. Longterm caregivers need nurses and assistants to bathe and medicate aging Baby Boomers. Farmers want workers.

Every time something happens at the border, we anticipate reform. A caravan of migrants will leave Honduras or Guatemala and attempt to cross into Mexico at Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. A political disaster or a natural disaster will happen in the Northern Triangle, or the northern part of South America. Sometimes one military or the other will make a border incursion. An agent will get caught in a shootout during a drug deal, or an agent will shoot a migrant.

Whatever the story of the day, U.S. citizens think this is THE single event that will precipitate policy reform. This will be the point of inflection. This will be the turning point. But the truth is, nothing big has changed in the quest for immigration policy reform since the Reagan era in 1986. Laws have changed, fences have been built, billions have been spent, but no big change has occurred for 40 years.

Politicians and pundits try to find the enemy, the other. They construct the image of the other. Currently, the U.S. is naming the cartels, or transnational criminal organizations. If the sun comes up, the Border Patrol blames smugglers. No matter the incident, we make no progress toward our expressed goal.

When elected officials, public administrators, and others make symbolic visits to the border with an entourage, purportedly on a fact-finding trip, they don’t visit the concrete and steel obelisks left by surveying engineers in past centuries to mark the border. They don’t wade out into the ever-changing center of the river demarcating the border. They don’t stand in the middle of bridges between countries or touch the artificial lines at ports of entry that designate the border between two countries. They don’t observe the fact that even those lines mark the boundaries of stolen lands. They have no sense of history or context.

No. They come to the borderlands with written scripts ready to tell the public what they found on their trip. After the hearing, they turn to scripts written in Washington before the entourage ever left Washington. The prepared script is intended to address the hearts and minds of constituents, voters, donors, administrators of agencies dependent on funding. Border delegations are not conducted to learn new things – they are staged to support policy preferences of the people who called the meeting. The public pays for the whole thing and gets nothing out of it.

Sociologists and others have long established that race is a social construction; that is, we are taught to separate ourselves from one another based on skin color, hair, speech, and more to the point, that one set of characteristics are spoken of as white, generally denoting a heritage from Europe. Nothing about race is scientifically based. Brown people have been crossing what is now considered the border since time immemorial. Hundreds of tribes and nations existed in what is now the U.S. Hundreds of languages were spoken. Many had trade, familial, and religious connections with people hundreds, if not thousands, of miles from their homelands. Many were seasonal migrants, following game, growing seasons, and comfort from significant swings in seasonal climates.

In the last century, large numbers of “brown” migrants have crossed into the United States for many reasons, chief among them family reunification and employment. Scholars have studied them. In the past 50 years specifically, many social and political trends have emerged. First-generation migrants (some with legal status, some not) have much more tolerant and permissive attitudes toward migrants who come to the U.S. without the approval of the U.S. government authorities. The third and fourth generations exhibit significant resistance and intolerance toward new migrants. Politically, the longer a migrant and his or her family have been in the United States, political orientations and affiliations generally become more conservative – more red, if you will. Some of this is explained by increases in the socioeconomic status of Latino families over time.

Over the last four decades, tens of thousands of Latino men and women have joined the U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Customs, and many other law enforcement agencies at federal, state, local, and even tribal levels. This phenomenon has been likened to the migration from Ireland to the U.S. when Irish men became firemen and police officers in major cities to prove that they wanted to become bonafide “Americans.”

Along the Rio Grande River that defines about half of the border between the U.S. and Mexico, the voting behavior of Latinos has been solid blue for decades, if not a century. Democrats could basically ignore efforts to mobilize these Latinos for voting purposes because they were decidedly in favor of the Democrats. No more. The voting has increasingly been in favor of Republicans. Voting has reflected many things: race, gender, masculinity, traditional religious values, and more. In short, we have observed a major shift. Many Latinos were brown until they wanted to be seen as white.

The so-called Drug War was started by President Richard Nixon as a way of waging war on Blacks and eliciting votes from whites. The war was first urban, then it expanded to rural areas. Now it is focused on international venues. The war, nearly 60 years old and still going, gives politicians the pretense of caring for their people.

More than a trillion dollars have been spent on the elusive goal of ridding drug use by Americans. The result is clear: Americans love to use drugs. The results of the drug war are clear: The price of drugs has decreased over the decades while their purity and thus potency has risen. Drugs are ubiquitous. Most of the time an American drug user can find drugs easily, knowing that the quality of the drugs they purchase is high and that the price is less than it was in previous years. Horror stories abound about drug dealers “cutting” their products with chemicals that have negative health consequences and even death. Most of those stories are simply tales designed to perpetuate and justify the mission narratives of organizations like the Drug Enforcement Administration.

It was very convenient to combine the issues of illegal immigration and drug enforcement to give even more power and authority to elected officials in the U.S. It seemed logical. After all, the drugs primarily came across the border. Politicians used this as a powerful new way to raise funds, pass legislation, increase penalties, and achieve reelection. Politicians love to be reelected. They act like a district attorney who rises in local power by being tough on crime. The problem, of course, is that migrants don’t use the drugs, are rarely used in the smuggling of the drugs, and. And migrants usually commit only administrative violations, not felonies. Drug enforcement and border enforcement must be uncoupled.

Where is the border? Locating the border is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Hope comes from understanding that the border is in the human heart. If we would locate it there, in the heart, where imagination lives, we would do better at reforming border policies. The border does exist in part in the bureaucratic wasteland. It exists in the cartels. It exists in the fears borne by those worried about sovereignty. It is in many places.

The border is in the markets created by our enforcement-only policies. So much money is in the congressional bills and the agency budgets of those who want to make political careers out of enforcement. The drug war has been institutionalized. But, if we decide to have empathy, if we decide that there are mutually beneficial ways to adapt to the inexorable migration from the south to the north, and we decide that there are ways to implement new policies with a vision of being good neighbors, the border can be changed.

In 2001 I was part of a day-long BBC forum on immigration in Mexico City. Six of then-Mexican President Fox’s cabinet members were there. My friend and counterpart on the Mexico-Guatemala border, Padre Flor de Maria Rigoni, and I were across the large table from one another. We talked about U.S. policies and Mexican visions of how to adapt to the surging migration. Also, there were notable people including ambassadors and Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberto Menchu Tum. We spoke repeatedly about the follies of immigration enforcement and assumptions. Then it came time to take a break.

To take a smoke break in 2001 meant going outside to get away from all of the smokers in the room. I found myself standing next to the highest-ranking U.S. State Department representative there that day. I looked at him and said, “So, Michael, what is it like to represent the most imperial country in human history?” He smiled and responded, “Well, Robin, there were the Romans, you know.” I said, “Yes, but they didn’t expect everyone in the world to love them.” His response: “That has been a problem.” When the empire names the problem, defines it, funds it, and implements the solution, individuals, groups, and even other countries have no say in the problem.

All political behavior involves political psychology to some degree. The biggest change we can long for is a realistic hope that the oppressive policies held by the U.S. can be changed to a vision that we can have mutually beneficial arrangements with the countries in the western hemisphere that are based on human rights. I know. It’s a dream, but all dreams can be implemented if we work in concert.

“The border” may be the ultimate reification of a policy in modern times, especially the U.S. southwest border. By that, I mean the border has been symbolized as a threat to the citizens of the United States. At least seven successive administrations have focused on illegal entry, crime, disease, drug trafficking, sex trafficking, and even terrorism. For a while, Border Patrol officials carried a card that said their mission was operational control of the border. Their mission has been fluid for a long time.

A hundred years ago, someone wanting to cross the border would simply pay a “head tax,” sometimes of only a nickel. Any law enforcement that was to be done would be done by local or state authorities. The head tax simply offset the expense of the person at the toll booth receiving the toll and entering data in a book. In 2025, the border came to represent the horrors of what the world had to offer and U.S. resistance to the horror, and to define the “us” and “them” that is common for populist, authoritarian political leaders. In 2001 George W. Bush announced that if you are not with us, you are against us. That, too, has been reified to become the concept of fortress America. The reality is that the border should represent promise and opportunity, not some horror show.

A young, glamorous, made-for-TV reporter traveled with me to the desert for an interview about my work for Humane Borders. It was her first story with a local TV station. She inquired both about the humanitarian work and our advocacy work. “Why are you doing all of this?” she asked. I said, “They lack papers. We’re trying to help them get papers. The only difference between citizens and migrants is a document.”

She soon left Tucson for another television market and more university work. Some years later, she returned at a time when I was also working to oppose the gay marriage ban in Arizona. Once again, it was her first story back in town. We went into the sanctuary of the church I served and she asked me, “Why are you going to host a mini-town hall meeting to oppose the gay marriage ban?” I smiled and said, “It’s the same story from the first time you met me. We’re just trying to get these people papers.”

The border is multidimensional, but the story has been focused. The border is broken, and only the federal government can fix the border. That’s the story. But fixing it will require huge efforts from citizens.

I once called about 15 stakeholders to a meeting where we confronted the local newspaper publisher who was new to town. Activists, members of the clergy, representatives from the Congressional office, Border Patrol, Citizenship and Immigration Services and others were present. We wanted the local paper to understand the only appropriate editorial and reporting stance was found in the message that the border is broken and only the Feds can fix it. The paper had fallen into a pattern of reporting that was tantamount to Trump’s famous dictum: “Well, there are some good people on all sides.” That kind of diffusion of a central message will not serve as a guide for reform. While all the stakeholders should have a voice, one clear message needs to be sent to the federal government.

Any efforts at reforming U.S. immigration policies must begin with that basic assumption. Communities and regions are made up of state actors, tribal leaders, elected officials, representatives of civil society, religious groups, nonprofit organizations, neighborhood groups, the Fourth Estate, municipalities, courts, and more. Unless all voices coalesce around a single, coherent approach to organize and manage migration with an eye to fundamental American values in a way that promotes and defend human rights, nothing will get done. A letter to a member of Congress, a governor, or a U.S. Senator will not cut it. Without a groundswell of urgency, the decades-long confusion and conflict that exists now will persist.

A way must be found. A scholarly consensus based on decades of research confirms what activists have been saying: the so-called immigration debate in the United States conflates dozens of issues: nationalism, racism, labor, drug enforcement, and the concept of national security. Pundits, networks, influencers, and political action committees are not helping.

Would-be reformers of immigration policy in Congress would do well to research the literature on immigration policy implementation over the last decades to aggregate the complaints and criticisms of existing policies to begin to move toward a new set of assumptions to guide reform. Just reading polls and sizing up constituents is not enough.

Many histories have been written about U.S. immigration policies and of the misguided assumptions underlying those policies. Many efforts were made to control migration in terms of race. Eugenics guided many immigration laws, and eugenics still influence Stephen Miller who advises President Trump. Extreme nationalism increased xenophobia and specific fears of others. Laws were passed that attempted to control ideologies. This country is better than that, or at least it should be. Ideas, racial identities, religious affiliations, and ethnicities cannot be the kinds of organizing principles used by a country to maintain some misguided self-perceptions.

Enforcement at the border must reflect the core values of this divided country. A just border is not just a border. A just border is a place and an ethos in which a consensus exists that both reflects and refracts the way in which the citizens want to be in the world.

A former Border Patrol commissioner testifying before a Congressional committee called migrants “ground clutter” on his radar. He understood his job to be 90 percent anti-terrorism. He could not see that it is impossible to stop migration and that it is necessary to adapt to it. Even well-thought-out public law will not solve all the problems individuals and interests perceive to be associated with immigration. It will, however, become a new narrative to support the ideas and ideals of how we should be as an international actor in the world.

For about one hundred years the place most of the world’s migrants chose as their new home was the United States. In fact, some three-quarters of all migration in the world ended in the United States in a movement that forever changed the character of the country. Migration enriched this nation.

While this book is written in the hopes of increasing public discourse about immigration/migration policy reform, it is also a model of how a much larger discourse about human rights, civil rights, and migrant rights can be expanded to enact and implement legal-political structures (laws and enforcement of laws) to enable humans to flourish. Human rights is the story above the story.

In spring of 2005, I designed four 11”x17” color posters to warn migrants at the border of what was ahead of them. Our Geographical Information System specialist did the technical work. The maps depicted four of the major corridors used by migrants to cross the border. The maps had a clear warning message: “Don’t go. There’s not enough water.” The immediate inspiration came from meeting a vivacious 15-year-old Mayan beauty queen a few miles south of the border. She was wearing open-toe shoes and a strappy top that gave her no protection from the sun – two of the worst things you can wear in the desert. She was so excited and enthusiastic. With wide eyes, she said, “Reverend, I’m going to be in Las Vegas in a few hours!” I looked at her and loved her on the spot. I said, “No, Mija, you might be dead.”

The maps were a topographical projection showing how far one can typically walk in one day, two days, and so forth. They showed the paved roads and the cities and communities. The locations of prior deaths were indicated by small red dots. Water station locations were shown with small blue flags. A chart showed the number of deaths on average according to the months of the year. A box on the map listed dangers and how to prepare for them. They included information about calling the authorities. The whole idea was to get the migrants’ attention by informing them that crossing the border can be deadly. We were trying to use the most basic of ethics: informed consent. Someone needed to be honest about the trip. All the Border Patrol public service announcements did was try to scare the migrants. Scare tactics don’t work on teenagers who think they are invincible.

The Tucson Sector of the United States Border Patrol was at the time the busiest sector in the United States for attempted border crossings. Truth is, it was the busiest sector for successful crossings, too.

We distributed maps in Sonora, Mexico, shared them with media, used them in conferences to talk about the migration, and gave paper and electronic copies to various officials including consular official from several countries. When asked for comment, officials at the Tucson Sector Border Patrol endorsed the maps as a way of helping save lives and warn migrants to be better prepared. That was in May 2005.

In November, a delegation from Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission paid us a visit in Tucson. A plan was made for Mexico to print and distribute 72,000 of the warning posters and share electronic versions in the so-called sending communities: those towns, cities, and villages in Mexico that have historically been the homes of those who migrate.

I held a press conference on Jan. 24, 2006, at Hotel Maria Cristina, my favorite haunt in Mexico City. Lots of Mexican media, the Associated Press, a few U.S. media outlets, and others we never identified filled the small event room at the hotel. Less than an hour later the news broke worldwide. The Associated Press published a photograph of me talking about the posters along with an accompanying story that appeared in over 500 newspapers in less than 24 hours. Google quit counting after 500 in those days; it may have appeared in 1,000 or more.

Totally unrelated, I was ill with Montezuma’s revenge. (Don’t laugh –Mexicans get it when they come to the U.S.) I went to my room where I learned that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security was surprised and pissed off about the maps. I kept a blog at the time, and I posted something, what I don’t remember. The next day, the Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff held a single-purpose press conference just to denounce me and the map project. As far as I know, I’m the only minister in DHS history to be so denounced. I returned to my blog and wrote: “Any nation that refuses to give the information to children they need to save their lives is guilty of child abuse.”

I never heard from those folks again. But the damage had been done. The night before, so much pressure had been put on Mexico’s State Department and the National Commission on Human Rights by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Department of State to not print the maps that the project was stopped. However, the public was so interested that the website hosting the maps crashed over and over as people from all around the world downloaded copies of the maps. The computer server just couldn’t keep up. Less than 24 hours after the conference, we declared victory, because the maps were everywhere. We didn’t have to print or distribute anything. The internet and public interest did it all for us. The preacher in me said that the secretary of DHS couldn’t stop the Lord’s work.

The morning after the conference, the warning posters were the number one story in hundreds of media outlets. Back in Tucson, Humane Borders set up the conference room at First Christian Church for a live broadcast for Good Morning America. Editorial writers took pens in hand and used a lot of ink in American and foreign newspapers writing about the project. Our story was even on the front page of Pravda in Moscow. The day after that, I Tucker Carlson tried to go after me, and I ate his lunch on a live satellite broadcast from the church parlor. Twenty years later, the warning posters still live on computer servers all around the world.

Humane Borders’ vice president, Mark Townley, and I made a special trip that spring through Mexico and Central America to distribute DVDs of the maps to journalists, political leaders, shelter operators, local governments, various state department officials, religious leaders, and even the regional office of the United Nations in Honduras.

The idea for the warning posters originally came to me from a requirement of our first water station permit in 2001 to print and distribute warnings to migrants and to detail where water stations were. I thought I had government approval for warning migrants of the dangers and the realities that lie ahead for migrants attempting to cross the Mexico-U.S. border. We were hopeful, too, that we could encourage migrants to cross in corridors where there were water stations instead of crossing the Tohono O’Odham Nation’s lands where no water stations existed.

A famous writer once quipped that finding a water station in the desert was a bit like winning the lottery. The fact is, however, that the Center for Applied Spatial Analysis at the University of Arizona conducted a study and determined that the presence of water stations in the desert is very statistically significant in reducing deaths. Are there enough stations? No. Do they matter? Emphatically yes.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum wrote:

So, you voted to build a wall.

Well, dear Americans, even if you don’t understand much about geography, since for you America is your country and not a continent, it is important for you to know, before the first brick is laid, that there are 7 billion people beyond that wall. But since you don’t really know the term “people,” we will call them “consumers.” There are 7 billion consumers ready to replace their iPhones with Samsung or Huawei devices in less than 42 hours.

They can also replace Levis with Zara or Massimo Dutti.

In less than six months, we can easily stop buying Ford or Chevrolet cars and replace them with Toyota, KIA, Mazda, Honda, Hyundai, Volvo, Subaru, Renault, or BMW, which are technically better than the cars they produce. These 7 billion people can also stop subscribing to Direct TV, and we don’t want to do that, but we can stop watching Hollywood movies and start watching more Latin American or European productions that have better quality, message, cinematic techniques, and content.

Although it may sound incredible, we can skip Disney and go to the Xcaret resort in Cancun, Mexico, Canada, or Europe: there are other great destinations in South America, East America, and Europe.

And even if you don’t believe it, even in Mexico there are better hamburgers than McDonald’s and they have better nutritional content.

Has anyone seen pyramids in the United States? In Egypt, Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Sudan and other countries there are pyramids with incredible civilizations.

Find out where to find the wonders of the ancient and modern world. None of them in the U.S. Shame on Trump, he would have bought them and sold them!

We know that Adidas exists, not just Nike, and we can start wearing Mexican sneakers like Panam. We know more than you think.

We know, for example, that if these 7 billion consumers don’t buy their products, there will be unemployment and their economy will collapse (within the racist wall) to such an extent that they will beg us to tear down this ugly wall.

We didn’t want to, but …

You want a wall, you get a wall. Sincerely yours.

We think of the border as the wall, but in reality, it is very difficult to find the border. Sheinbaum suggests how complicated the border really is. The border is many things and found in many places. It’s also just a concept. At the same time, it is a concept that is expensive, deadly, and disastrous. True, it is an imaginary line, a geographical reference point, a GPS pin, an artifice of war, and a line in the sand marking off an international purchase.

In a larger sense, though, the border is much more. It is a river, a desert, and a surveyor’s nightmare. The border is found in several different courts, in farms, factories, and construction sites. It is found in shelters where volunteers explain rights and options. It is a reference work sitting at desks in embassies, a guidebook in the offices of Customs agents. The border is a concept in newsrooms used by editors to assign journalists. Hollywood uses it to connect themes of violence, family, military, culture, English, and Spanish to the entertainment values of viewers. Humane Borders’ work was the focus of numerous projects in Hollywood. Members of Congress authorize funds and the personnel of the agencies in the Executive that use those funds. They use the border to further political careers, show responsiveness to constituents, and fund election campaigns.

In August of 2002, three U.S. Representatives, Tom Tancredo, Jim Sensenbrunner, and Peter Hoekstra, traveled to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument because park ranger Kris Eggle was killed while responding to a border incursion from Mexico. The park superintendent and the chief ranger had issued a permit to Humane Borders to install water stations in the monument about 18 months earlier. The chief ranger kept track of the many different law enforcement personnel who visited the monument on business. He told me he had counted more than 20 different “badges” in a couple of years. Everyone, it seems, had some interest or other in enforcing the border, including Arizona cactus cops, the Arizona Department of Public Safety, the FBI, Border Patrol, federal agents dispatched out of Phoenix, military types, and many more. Some of the various authorities had inter-operability of radios. Park ranger Eggle responded to a Border Patrol call that day.

Mexican authorities were pursuing drug-related criminals in Mexico. The bad guys, and there are bad guys in Mexico, were driving north. They decided to drive through the barbed wire fence separating the two countries. Eggle, who was wearing body armor, decided to respond and to exit his vehicle. The criminals responded to seeing him with a high-powered rifle. Eggle was shot in the groin where his armor was not protecting him. He died.

The three U.S. Representatives wanted to do a photo-op at the monument to show the American people the urgency of deploying more law enforcement. I learned of their plans and alerted the chief ranger. The next day, the chief ranger stood by the three-strand barbed wire fence and announced before the cameras and reporters that the fence was not built to stop migrants from entering the U.S. It was built to keep cattle from crossing the line. Like Ellis Island, the fence was about public health before it was an international scandal. The monument personnel didn’t want cattle on their protected lands. Some rules and regulations are desirable and essential.

I called a reporter from the Rocky Mountain News who traveled with the congressional group. The Representatives were trying hard to make the case that this was a major international incident. I explained to the reporter that this was a local drug deal gone bad and that it could have happened in any city in the U.S. That story ran in Tancredo’s home district newspaper.

A few days later, in Ajo, Arizona, a funeral was held for Eggle at the Baptist church. The church was full of people, and people were standing outside. Media were present. The Border Patrol had helicopters do a fly-by. Tancredo gave an impassioned eulogy designed to convince the audience and the media in attendance of the urgency of beefing up the border.

I stood outside with the chief ranger next to a police motorcycle. When the service ended, we heard the crackle of the radio with the message “Kris Eggle. 10-7,” which is U.S. police code for “out of service.” The chief ranger and I agreed that the focus of the day should have been on the loss of a good young man. I had met Eggle months earlier and immediately liked him. The media event at the fence and the funeral in Ajo was pure political spectacle.

I admit that I was guilty of the same thing. I had hosted five foreign film crews at the same water station in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument only 15 months earlier. My event was a plea for humanitarian assistance and policy reform. But the spectacle of the death, the fence, and the funeral was to promote militarism, nationalism, and to engender fear.

A few months later, I was on a one-hour Phil Donahue Show in New York City with my wife. Phil’s first words of the show as he walked to me, “You wouldn’t be offended if I said I think you’re doing the Lord’s work?” I said I thought we were doing that. Before us in the audience sat the father of Kris Eggle, who had served in Vietnam and who spoke about his son being a warrior in a global struggle.

Politics is how we work things out, and politics is a game of naming, framing, and blaming. What happened here? What is this all about? Who is at fault?

When we come up with responses (I dare not say solutions because we haven’t come up with one yet), we end up giving power to someone or to some agency to take care of the so-called problem. It works at the individual level and at the national level.

When I was in high school in the ’60s, my father took me outside of town to visit an elder from our church who owned some land. We looked at cows, fences, a windmill, and more. We came to a little tin shack. The elder told us that this was a place for “his” Mexican, as if he owned him. He hired the migrant, showed him what work he wanted him to do, and provided a place for him to live and an antique wood-burning stove to cook on. He bragged about how he would take him to town for haircuts, clothes, and groceries. He smiled and said, “If he causes me any trouble, I can just call the INS and get him deported.” I lost all respect for that elder.

Most of the time, we look at problems and we try to find THE answer, as if there were one. We think that if everyone just had all the information they needed in the political world, THE answer would be obvious. There are problems with that kind of thinking. For one, we never have all the information needed. For another, even the information we have has been manipulated by how politicians answer media questions, how opinion leaders see their advantage, and how we are conditioned to respond according to our own personal histories. We fail to see that TV producers and print editors affect the reporting.

I worked with two MSNBC producer/reporters on a one-hour special in which the reporter was going to cross the border and accompany migrants. 9/11 happened. MSNBC dug up all the film and put a new narration on top of it, creating a one-hour documentary, and turning their work into what could only be called a Border Patrol or DEA training film called Dangerous Crossing. Seldom is there just one answer. Add in our subjective nature. Our minds and even our bodies react to and interact with the problems we’re trying to solve. Too often, we’re capable of changing our minds for the worst. Most problems and solutions are ambiguous. Anything can be torn down and put back in another way.

Ice cream. Do you like ice cream? Of course! Should you eat ice cream? Probably not. Are the milk cows treated well? I don’t know. Are the makers of the ice cream paid fairly? I don’t know. Waffle cone or paper cup? Where does the trash go? Is this place inspected by the health department? Has that employee washed her hands? Has the cashier been vaccinated? One could ask 100 questions and not investigate the simple pleasure of eating ice cream sufficiently to truly make an informed decision.

We make judgments all day long. Is immigration good or bad? Are the politicians voting for good policy or bad policy? Are the people we hire to enforce the law good people or bad people? How can we know the answers to questions like these? Just how long are we expected to study something before we support or resist a new public policy? When things get political (and everything, including water and air, is political), making decisions is tough.

Are migrants making good contributions to our society? To the economy? To the lived experience of citizens? Do we value their contributions? Do we recognize the interdependence of countries, cultures, languages, work ethics, and religions? Do we extend dignity to those who are different from us? Do we love our neighbors like we love ourselves? We certainly do love ourselves in this country. So, we have set a very high standard! If only we could live up to it.

Some U.S. citizens bring strangers into their homes to care for children, cook, tend to the household. They become part of the family. Other citizens don’t want any strangers living in their neighborhood and they have no problem hiring officers to keep them out of the country. For most people, though, questions about immigrants, migrants, neighbors are ambiguous. Sometimes it just takes too long to investigate the problem.

So, we must turn to some sort of morality or values-driven line of questioning. Is immigration good? Is it bad? Are those people good or bad? We can’t say that immigration and the border are just one thing. If they are instead relative or variable, can some moral position solve the problems? First off, on matters of public policy, politics takes over. Even when taking moral positions, some people end up taking hard lines there too. Often it boils down to moral certitude and oppression as if it grew out of some inquisition. People become morally certain. They will take the position of “I’m right. You’re wrong. And I’m going to hit you over the head.”

Sometimes, the moral positions appeal is made to law, but that’s not much help. Concentration camps, Apartheid, and slavery were all legal. Trump’s Big Beautiful Bill is apparently creating a huge national police force that is basically legal. Legal and moral are two different things. At the end of this study, I will argue that we do have to have some sort of moral vision for determining how we are to change immigration policies in the United States. But it is always messy, and ideas don’t always fit the people involved very well. Can we just leave it to public opinion or vote on it? No, because even the questions we ask people are politically charged.

Politicians don’t always really like people. They want the power that comes from having people stand behind them. The question of power always makes the people suspect that politicians really aren’t for them. Some politicians want to give people power, rights, and respect. Others want to take it all away. In any case, the politicians want people to vote for their ideas. The trouble in the United States, though, is that the number of non-voters is larger than either of the two big political parties in the U.S. Political will is hard to come by unless an authoritarian position is taken. When that happens, resistance is inevitable.

In the U.S., one politician can decide that immigrants are good, that immigration is good, that everyone needs to be respected and extended dignity. He or she can hold those positions and raise money to get reelected based on his or her positions. The opposite is true: A politician can say that immigrants are bad and that immigration is bad. Money can be raised for reelection that way as well.

Politicians like Donald Trump can call migrants drug dealers, murderers, rapists, monsters, killers. Court records reveal that some are though very few. A mentally ill undocumented person bludgeoned to death my colleague and his wife, so I don’t disagree that we have to have law enforcement focused on the border. But roadblocks and checkpoints could be set up on major interstate highways and background checks could be run on all U.S. citizens. Law enforcement would find U.S. citizen drug dealers, murderers, rapists, monsters, killers, deadbeat dads, tax evaders, sex traffickers, and more. Data tell us that the undocumented are, on average, younger, healthier, dramatically less likely to have committed any crimes, and the undocumented are less likely to be involved with law enforcement in any way in the future.

So, what do I have to offer? A new way of doing things? A new strategy? A new analysis? Should we be using new technologies? Can diplomacy be used successfully? How can we punish migrants more through the courts and incarceration? Do Border Patrol and ICE agents need more education and training? Well, the answer to that is yes, but it doesn’t solve the problem. Getting bogged down in normal conversations is getting us nowhere.

Nearly 25 years ago, I was invited to a meeting of religious leaders, NGOs, government officials, university faculty, immigration activist types, and others in Mexico City. We had two simultaneous language translation booths going, and very high-level conversations flowed for a whole day. One Mexican leader was well connected. He was part of the national university, connected to the Roman Catholic Church, and well respected by government officials, plus he had ties to U.S. NGOs. He and I got into an intense conversation about immigration policy. He was getting agitated and trying to summarily dismiss my ideas that immigration policy reform will only, finally come from Washington, D.C. He was saying that I needed to live in Mexico ten years, fully understood the language, live among the people, participate in the politics, etc. Only then, he said, would I have anything meaningful to contribute to the conversation. I had even boiled it all down by saying that immigration reform hinges on a few white men in Washington changing their minds and their hearts. Just as the conversation was about to erupt more, the door opened, and in walked Don Samuel Ruiz, former bishop of Chiapas.

Everyone in the room stood up as is custom in traditional Mexico. Don Samuel, how great for you to join us. Welcome. Please join us. We’re discussing immigration reform. Please, we’ve reserved a chair. What do you think about immigration reform? Even before Don Samuel was seated, he said, “It’s easy: some people in D.C. have to change their hearts and minds on the issue.” I wanted to stand up and spike my Bible like an NFL receiver spikes a football in the end zone. The gentleman with whom I was having the colloquy fell silent. It was my pleasure to receive Ruiz in Tucson some years later and to hear him speak on other occasions.

This is what we need: a large discourse with many participants, many citizens, many officials, many deeply knowledgeable people from all walks of civil society to come together and cobble together policy reform. But the target audience is still white guys in D.C. I’ve been party to so many conversations. I’ve testified before Congress. I’ve sat in the conference room of Customs and Border Protection in Washington, D.C. I’ve spoken to Border Patrol agents in muster meetings in their station offices. That’s real. down-home, backyard, retail politics!

I’ve given lectures in dozens of major universities on three coasts, in the heartlands, and along the Canadian border, and been escorted into some venues by police because people are passionate about these kinds of politics. I’ve lectured to adoring crowds in Mexico. The conversations are not easy, but there’s widespread agreement from the left and from the right that there are better ways to think about immigration reform. I’ve been in most of the major media markets on earth. From Vatican radio, the front page of Pravda in Moscow, the Manchurian News, the Pakistani Military News, nearly every country in the western hemisphere and most countries in Europe, I’ve been quoted about migrant safety and immigration policy and responded to comments and criticisms from the right and the left.

As it is, conversations about reform are always piecemeal. Activists try talking to Border Patrol, but it is almost always an unproductive venture.

This book is an outline for a larger, public discourse. What is needed is a bottom-up approach. Top-down has failed us for 40 years. Reform will come with a learned, committed social movement expressing empathy for those on the receiving end of the policies. The social movement needs to expand to several countries and receive expressed interest from students, activists, congregations, civil society, universities, bureaucrats, and broadcasters.

This book about immigration, imagination, and implementation is neither a radical Progressive work nor a pro-market approach. It is, instead, an argument that is from the passionate center of the immigration reform debate. Passionate in the sense that current policies are destructive to human life, the environment, wildlife, international accord, and domestic tranquility. We should be passionate about human things. It is centered in the sense that there is much to be taken from traditional positions on the right and on the left. There’s much to be reformed and much to be given up on both sides.

A REFORM PROPOSAL

Americans have been talking about reforming immigration policies since the last major reform in 1986. I’ve been working as an activist for that long, and I’ve been academically studying immigration policies, practices, and laws since 1991. A major reform will have to include many things. To begin, when I go to congregations, universities, public forums, and to the media, I take informal polls. I repeatedly get the same answers.

I ask, how many of you think national security is a real concern that must be considered when discussing migration? Nearly every hand in the house goes up. If pressed, I think all hands would go up. From that, I perceive that national security is a major part of the discourse on the border. When I’ve pressed more, I find that rational people can differ wildly about what to do about immigration as a national security issue. Border law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and even the military come to small conversations with legislators to discuss reform. Many stakeholders are excluded from the conversations.

I always ask how many of you think that a stable labor force is a major consideration when it comes to immigration? Or said another way, how many of you think that U.S. workforce economics must be considered in immigration reform? Again, nearly every hand in the house goes up. The people always affirm that the economy is a major concern for reform. The economy is not the stock market. The economy is, by definition, just jobs and wages. The stock market does correlate somewhat with the Gross Domestic Product, but not that closely. Economic factors are major concerns for both legal and illegal migration, but every indicator tells us that the U.S. benefits greatly from both legal and illegal immigration.

How many in the audience want to see a major expansion of human rights when it comes to migration and the border? Only about half of the audience raise their hands, and even then, they don’t raise their hands with much energy. It’s as if they’re only sort of paying respect for the idea of human rights. While activists and many left-of-center politicians see it as a major issue, the public does not. Human rights is a low tier consideration even in my audiences which have a high interest in immigration reform. The U.S. legal-political experiment is based more on liberty than human rights, but that should change. On U.S. soil, how citizens treat “persons” should be of major concern.

Another question: how many of you want to see a whole lot less political noise along the border or about the border? Are you tired of the rancor expressed by politicians, groups, activists, and citizens along the U.S.-Mexico border? Every hand goes up quickly and forcefully. I take that to indicate a yearning in the public for solutions that can be supported. Americans (and Mexico and Central America) want the so-called border to be reformed.

For decades, politicians on both sides of the aisle have argued about the numbers of law enforcement personnel that should be deployed along the border. They’ve argued about what kinds of technology and how much of it should be deployed to deter migration. They’ve argued about the effects of militarization upon wildlife and about how many environmental regulations should be waived. So, I always ask the audience about their concerns regarding violence along the border and in Mexico. Hands go up quickly and forcefully. A certain amount of violence is part of border life. In fact, borders create violence. Gunrunning, the smuggling of drugs and humans, cartels fighting each other and their local, state, and federal governments, and government corruption (both in the U.S. and in Mexico) …each of these things need to somehow go away.

Audiences affirm that there should be focused attention upon law enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border. When asked further, however, strong opinions are voiced about how to do that. Rarely is there support for U.S. military or national guard presence. Most agree that Border Patrol agents need a lot more education and training, local knowledge, cultural appreciation, and more. The Border Patrol is the least trained major law enforcement organization in the U.S. The audience is also aware that Border Patrol agents are frequently arrested for violating laws of all kinds. In fact, on average, a Border Patrol agent is arrested for a felony every day of the year. Most crimes go unreported.

These questions and similar questions that I have asked for decades are also asked by politicians, journalists, activists, and others. Any major reform of immigration/migration policies must address these questions. There are more questions than answers it seems.

More the point, how many of you think the U.S. should enable migrants to come to the U.S. in a safe, orderly, legal way that separates migration from all the negative influences like the threat of terrorism, the fluctuations in unemployment, the partisan politics, and the violence? The audience starts asking where they sign on to a rational plan that recognizes the dignity of workers, celebrates family re-unifications, integrates economies, and addresses a whole bunch of concerns of citizens about health, drivers’ licenses, legal status to be in the country, employment authorizations, and more.

The questions change over time. Questions come up about DACAs (persons with deferred action for childhood arrivals status), about refugees, about asylum seekers, about children deported and children separated from parents by U.S. border enforcement agents.

Drugs come up in the questions about immigration reform. I have worked in hospitals and served as a pastor of churches, so I know drugs are a scourge. I also know that we can’t conflate immigration policies with drug enforcement policies. I currently reside in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. If you are familiar with the hit tv shows Better Caul Saul and Breaking Bad, you are aware that crystal meth (methamphetamine) was the answer to the Drug Enforcement Administration’s focus on controlling cocaine trafficking. The show revealed that if cocaine disappeared from the planet, chemists trying to pay for their health care bills would just manufacture a substitute here in the U.S. Americans love their drugs.

Other, newer questions emerge as well. How many of you want to see the United States invade Mexico and even annex lands? How many of you want to see the military attack cartel operations in Mexico regardless of civilian casualties? How many of you think that synthetic opiates can be stopped by using the U.S. military?

Hopefully, this book will stir a larger discourse about borders. And, hopefully, this book will offer a reasonable path forward by identifying concepts and proposals for migration policy reform that would enable the U.S. government and the governments of countries to the south to implement new policies to achieve reasonable responses to the questions above. It is my contention that unless the concrete, human needs of migrants who are currently living here and the concrete, human needs of migrants who are continually crossing the southern U.S. border are met, there will be no workable solution. So, human rights must be of major concern to those who would work toward immigration reform. It is my belief that there are ways that both migrants and U.S. citizens can benefit and find mutual ground.

For decades now, U.S. border policies have focused on strategies and tactics that simply do not work. The U.S. tries to make it physically difficult for undocumented persons to enter the U.S. The most visible thing that has been done starting in the 90s was the construction of fencing. Fencing was first constructed in urban areas to drive migrants out into the deserts which were thought to serve as a deterrent. That was a false assumption. In addition to fencing, the U.S. developed ground sensors to detect human traffic. Surveillance towers were erected. Truck mounted Starlight cameras were raised into the sky to detect human movement.

Checkpoints were created on highways to screen drivers and passengers. Various radiation-based screening technologies were deployed at ports of entry to “see through” vehicles to find persons and contraband hidden within. Horse patrols were re-instituted that mimicked the original patrolling of the border in the 1920s. Huge contracts were awarded to companies to do research and development on new ways to detect the presence of unauthorized persons between the ports of entry. And, of course, the number of Border Patrol agents is many times larger today than it was just 25 years ago.

Efforts have been made to make crossing the border more expensive. I met and walked with coyotes (migrant smugglers or guides) back in the 1980s. A grocery store employee would take off his apron, meet a family at the fence or the river and walk his customers to the bus station for a $20 bill. At this point, the cost to cross the Rio Grande River east of El Paso is over $7,000 per person. That doesn’t include the $13,000 cost for a cartel to help a migrant navigate through the Mexican National Guard just to get up to the border. In early 2025 and in response to President Donald Trump, the Mexican government agreed to deploy more than 10,000 Guardia Nacional to reduce border crossings.

U.S. employers want workers from Mexico and Central America. Even though there are a few federal (and even a few state) programs that enable that, it is a difficult thing to do. In some programs, employers must advertise for a period to fill a position and then prove to the government that it is difficult to secure employees to fill the position. In other programs, employers must vouch for the foreign employees and complete a lot of paperwork. In many cases, recording keeping and document management consume a significant amount of clerical time which is a burden on small employers. In all cases, it is simply difficult for employers to navigate the system.

Every element of the U.S. immigration policy system that includes everything from law enforcement to administrative compliance results in human rights abuses. In Mexico both the National Commission for Human Rights and each of the state commissions for human rights provide an ombudsman system in which human rights of citizens in general and workers in particular are protected. The United States has no corresponding institutions.

Jurists, the Department of Justice, and law enforcement officials argue about the differences in the rights of citizens versus the rights of non-citizens. From the time of the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.S. has been exceedingly slow in conforming U.S. policies to what is considered settled law and practice on the international scene. Rarely does the United States sign-on to international conventions concerning human rights.

Current policies, practices, and the new initiatives since the beginning of Donald Trump’s second term as President of the United States began result in family separations and diminishing care for children caught up in the mass deportation schemes. Some children are abandoned by law enforcement. Of particular concern to me, and thousands of others, is the death toll on men, women, and children crossing the border. Nearly 1,000 persons die each year on U.S. soil while attempting to cross the border and get to their destinations.

Enormous environmental destruction results from the construction of border wall sections, the creation of roads, and the diversion of the natural flows of water. Humans can quickly climb the walls and get where they are going – though many do suffer falls and often require expensive healthcare. Large mammals find it difficult to migrate, to mate, and to expand hunting grounds. Stadium-style lighting disrupts the migrations of birds and bats. Dozens of environmental waivers have been filed for border infrastructure to be built.

Efforts to implement law-enforcement-only policies are extremely expensive. In the summer of 2025, the average cost of deporting someone from the United States has grown to more than $17,000 per person. Constructing walls, operating detention facilities, maintaining tens of thousands of vehicles, operating immigration courts – on and on – the costs keep rising each year. Those costs do not include Department of Homeland Security expenses that are not directly tied to enforcement, nor do they include the new Department of Defense expenses to maintain a military presence in the so-called Roosevelt Reservation which is a sixty-foot strip of land parallel to the border that runs from California to Texas. In addition, the Northern Command and the Southern Command of the Department of Defense spend untold amounts of money to monitor various activities in Mexico, Central and South America that are related to migration.

In the process of building infrastructure along the border and maintaining a military and intelligence presence in the western hemisphere, the U.S. has created the infrastructure for the transnational criminal organizations, or cartels, in Mexico. Every time the U.S. begins a new initiative, the price of crossing the border goes up and enriches the coffers of the cartels. In short, the U.S. created the cartels. The cartels are taking billions of dollars every year from some of the poorest people in the western hemisphere. The more they take, the more time the migrants must be in the U.S. to offset the expenses of using the cartels’ services.

Enforcement-only policies, enforcement infrastructure, the rise of the cartels, the deliberate moving of the migration into the treacherous terrain of the deserts, the militarization of the border, and more have resulted in rising death rates of migrants while crossing the border. The death rates of migrants crossing are several times greater today than they were 25 years ago.

Employers are increasingly frustrated. Where once an employer could put a small advertisement in the paper for laborers on residential or commercial construction and find what they were looking for in just a day or two. Finding qualified workers takes much longer and delays project completions.

For decades, families have found themselves making very difficult decisions as policies and practices of law enforcement change. In the past if a family was apprehended, Border Patrol would allow a little time for a family to arrange for a relative to come pick up a child who is entitled to remain in the U.S. legally. Most often now, the parents and child are returned together to the country of origin. In the summer of 2025, there have been documented incidents when parents were taken in the streets of cities in the U.S. by ICE, and the child or children were simply left to fend for themselves.

Over the course of more than 40 years of my observing operations of law enforcement, reading the news, and studying academic journals, the abuse of human rights has skyrocketed. Migrants are physically abused, emotionally abused, verbally abused. While in detention, migrants have more hunger, show more fatigue, experience more dehydration, and present with significantly worsened medical conditions.

In shelters in Mexico, I’ve personally set bones of migrants beaten by Border Patrol agents. I’ve housed migrants in my church who have filed complaints against Border Patrol agents awaiting word from consulates about their cases only to be told that the personnel in the Office of Inspector General have more significant cases to attend. Case dismissed.

Abused migrants get deported. Many are the things a person can object to when it comes to immigration policy, especially border enforcement. Even just using the numbers provided to the public by the Department of Homeland Security, any analyst will conclude that border enforcement simply does not work. No enforcement-only approach will satisfy the goals of the people who reside in the United States or meet the needs of the undocumented who live here or the people who wish to come here and participate in the U.S. economy.

Rational plans must be developed that address the many competing realities along the border. Hopefully, the reader will find some here. Even more concepts are needed. What is needed most is a new politics with different assumptions. Something and many things must be done about the large, undocumented population of migrants living in the U.S. without an approved legal status. Something and many things must be done about the large, undocumented population of migrants crossing our border to work in the U.S. and/or to re-unite with members of their families. The two groups are different but very related. In large measure the numbers of undocumented persons currently living in the U.S. have increased significantly as more border enforcement has been deployed along the border.

At the macro level, something must be done to rigorously integrate our economies and reduce the disparities in wealth which contribute to migration. New politics. We see the effects of wealth disparity in U.S. in state-level and city-level data. Astounding differences in wealth motivate people to relocate. Migration should be recognized as a basic human right.

If we learn how to share resources and opportunities in this hemisphere, all will benefit. In terms of natural resources, the countries to the south have more than the U.S. Human resources in the south of us are phenomenal, too.

Immigration policy reform will require that many things be done at the same time in a major bill. As a matter of justice, however, providing the security that comes with legal status for those undocumented currently living in the U.S. without status is the top priority. The U.S. has no long-term interest to have poor neighbors living here or in regional countries. Having a large, undocumented population among the citizens is very un-American. The American thing to do is to draw them in. Previously, the U.S. passed an amnesty-style legislation package (IRCA’86). This time, the reform efforts need to be more constrained due to voter pressures. This time, the goals can be accomplished with long-term, interim visas.

To begin to address the needs of the undocumented living in the U.S., it is best to begin with good social scientific observations. Many trends have been very stable across time.

Decades of observations reveal that most of the people who cross our border with Mexico – including South and Central Americans simply do not wish to become U.S. Citizens. I’ve asked thousands of migrants intending to cross the U.S.-Mexico border about their intentions. Almost universally, the migrants want to come to the U.S., work, pay off debts, put together some money, and go home. Most say they need to work in the U.S. for 24-36 months to accomplish their goals. They are economically motivated, have a vision for the future, and are willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish their goals.

Over the last 25 years, the number of months migrants say that they want to remain in the U.S. has grown. Migrants must work longer to recoup the costs of migration today than they did one or two decades ago. Still, rather than staying and becoming citizens, they want to participate in the U.S. economy and eventually return to their homes, their families, and their way of life.

On average, some 35% of migrants that live in the United States without documentation self-deport every 10 years or so. The number was once even higher. For a long time, migrants would come and work, go home, return to the U.S. for another season of work, then return home once again. We called that circularity. Going home and returning for another season or another job is now very problematic.

Maintaining circularity is now too dangerous and too expensive for the migrant. A migrant goes home; that’s easy enough. But, coming back requires dangerous travel and a very significant expense to pay for the services of the cartels. If we could re-introduce and re-structure circularity, we would have far fewer migrants in the U.S. at any given moment. The Trump administration has a goal of removing a million migrants in a year. Restoring circularity could reduce the number of migrants in the U.S. at any given time by more than that, perhaps double that number. President Trump could “remove” one million or more migrants in a year just by handing out visas that enabled them to go home and come back.

Migrants for many reasons. They leave to be with family, to retire, to help family members with special needs, to build mom a house, or to replace the roof. Our system is very complicated. One does not need to be a U.S. citizen to participate in Social Security, but participants do have to be authorized to work. Many migrants do participate in Social Security, and some go home after being here for ten or more years and begin to draw their Social Security benefits there. Numerous meetings have been held to find ways to integrate retirement systems in the U.S. and Mexico.

The percentage of undocumented population residing in the U.S. didn’t get as high as it did overnight. That percentage has fluctuated from 12-15% for many decades. No remedy or proposed immigration reform solution considered will change the percentage of undocumented persons living in the U.S. overnight. Even mass deportations would have only a small impact. The only rational way to reduce the percentage of undocumented persons living in the U.S. is to change the politics of migration.

Quite simply, the percentage of people living in the U.S. undocumented goes down as soon as a legal status is conferred on a number of those persons. The very first step at migration reform is to provide migrants with a legal status to remain in the U.S. for an extended period.

We will debate how long that might be, but it stands to reason that the period should be at least as long as it takes to become a naturalized citizen, maybe more because of the administrative lead time may be longer than normal. That said, it must be remembered that many undocumented persons do not want to become citizens, and that, if they have the option, they will stay, work, then go home, perhaps to return another day. The good news is that they will have a legal status for the duration of their visa. They come out of the shadows. They can travel home. They can buy pizza, drink beer, and worship. Proposals and policies that require that a person go home, and wait are predicated on the idea that a person must pay a penalty – even family separation – prior to being considered for a long-term status. Those kinds of proposals are doomed to fail.

Implementing a program of supplying visas for undocumented persons in the U.S. is not something new in U.S. immigration history. Millions of people were legalized during the implementation of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, a program often erroneously referred to as amnesty. What I propose is that large numbers of people be given legal status through a very long-term visa, but that naturalization be separated from that process. An undocumented person who is living in the U.S. would be given an extended visa to participate in the U.S. economy, but that person would have few options at the end of the visa: return to the country of origin, become a naturalized citizen, or be arrested and deported.

This new visa program would begin with an interview. The U.S. conducted millions of such interviews during the implementation phase of IRCA86. The migrants come into the office for an appointment, establish identity, discuss the intended length of stay in the U.S. Criminal backgrounds are checked along with a determination of health status and more. Mexican authorities have told me that they would open their criminal databases to help certify workers for a new program. With this interview, the U.S. gains significant information that goes to address national security issues.

A long-term visa is issued that roughly parallels the path to citizenship but is not tied to it. Interviewers should be allowed to exercise a range of discretion and issue the visas that reflect the migrant’s employment, intention to stay in the U.S., the desire to become a citizen, and the needs of the migrant’s family such as children enrolled in schools. Given that the increased demand for the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services would be significant over the next decade, these visas should be offered in the range of, say, seven to fifteen years. Numbers that high need to be seriously considered because the so-called citizenship line is very long, and the legal process takes a very long time. Long term visas also avoid disrupting the economy the way mass deportations do.

Previous plans such as those promoted by Senators McCain of Arizona and Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts raised one hurdle after another in the way of the migrant on his way or her way to become a citizen. In my ministry, I met many married couples. I’ve known couples married for decades in which one person was undocumented. The idea of separating that couple to have one person go across the border and wait several years to come back into the same household as a citizen is abhorrent. Better ways must be discovered.

Plans have also been offered that amount to a gauntlet for individuals or families to run to legalize something that already exists. Rather than creating a gauntlet that ensures bureaucratic nightmares, human rights violations, and more, a new system should be created based on a mutually beneficial arrangement. Once a new visa is granted, continued status could be maintained by demonstrating and maintaining responsibility by securing drivers’ licenses, maintaining automobile and health insurance, obtaining appropriate vaccinations, and attending language classes. Punishing people for trying to do the right thing is just not a sound approach.

A migrant would have an incentive to comply with this more humane approach. With a new long-term visa, he or she could travel to visit family, participate fully in the U.S. economy, take out installment loans, and stimulate the U.S. economy with monies currently held in U.S. financial institutions. Airlines would love to sell round-trip tickets for migrants to go home and visit families. Employers would love to have employees who are not constantly afraid of being picked up by the authorities. One does not have to be a citizen to have a U.S. bank account. Billions of dollars are sitting in accounts right now that could be used to purchase homes and vehicles.

Few would argue that the current path to citizenship in the U.S. is fair. I’ll say it. The U.S. system is not fair. Few would say that visas are distributed fairly, that waiting times are fair, that quotas are equitable, or that costs borne by applicants are appropriate. There’s not much to like about the current U.S. immigration system. A major overhaul of the U.S. immigration system is long overdue for a major overhaul. Granting temporary protected status to people from one country and not another shows no respect for the individual plight of a would-be migrant and/or his or her family. The waiting time for a person from Scandinavia versus someone from the Philippines is incomprehensible. The Dominican Republic gets a quota of 40,000 visas the same as Mexico. Why? What tortured mathematical logic underlies that determination?

Yes, the U.S. immigration system needs reform. The proposals offered here, however, are distinct, separate, and specific. One could say that they are regional and not global. The biggest issues currently facing the U.S. are generated by migration from Mexico and Central America. The larger system could be addressed at the same time as the issues brought up here, or not. The argument being presented in this writing is that a just way of addressing the undocumented and those wanting to work in the U.S. need to be substantially improved to be just and that those changes can be done in a way that is beneficial to migrants and to the U.S.

Immigration laws and the proceedings of immigration courts are often harsh, sterile, heartless, and unwarranted. The lived experiences of migrants may be called hopeful during the proceedings, but they are arduous and joyful only when papers are presented to them allowing them to be in the U.S. lawfully.

Many social costs are associated with this migration. Families are separated. Men (predominantly) feel compelled to migrate to provide for their families. They make the journey. They begin new lives in the U.S. But they’re very human. They start relationships here and often end up maintaining relationships back home or abandoning wives and children. Having been a pastor, I know that we can and must find better ways.

As noted, in decades past the average stay of a migrant was less than two years. It is difficult to measure, but the average stay is probably now more than 10 years. That is a serious factor that leads to the creation of new families and increased claims upon resources.

Restructuring the migration by issuing long-term visas will be a major contribution to restoring circularity. In the past, migrants would come and go across the border with little or no consequence. If a migrant failed to cross, he or she could simply try again until success was achieved. This enabled migrants to come to the U.S., work, and then go home. It was something of a perfect arrangement for employers and migrants alike. Migrants could work at seasonal jobs like shearing sheep, maintaining ski slopes, working in agriculture, construction, and hospitality. Benefits? Social costs were reduced, families stayed in touch, the economy was stimulated. U.S. taxpayers were not footing the multi-billion-dollar bills for enforcement, surveillance, courts, detention, and repatriation.

With new visas, the migrant population would be able to positively interact with law enforcement, report physical and sexual abusers, enjoy greater human rights, and learn that interactions with officials at federal, state, and local levels need not be perceived as threatening. With new visas, fewer fathers would be separated from children and spouses by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

New visas would enable full participation in the U.S. economy. Having addresses, phone numbers, internet accounts and more enables law enforcement and other service providers to locate suspects or clients by following a trail of financial transactions, leases, and other records. Neighbors would have less reluctance to give out information, and migrants would not be triggered to flee or resort to criminal activity to avoid confrontation.

Over time, migrants would be well on their way to establishing a foothold in the U.S. until such time they chose to permanently return to their country of origin or become citizens. They would be motivated to comply with the incentive structures that characterize a path to citizenship. The percentage of foreign-born persons living in the U.S. would be reduced along with the resentment that has historically been associated with that phenomenon.

Providing long-term visas for migrants who are living in the U.S. would provide many benefits. Fewer ICE agents would be required, thus reducing enormous costs for taxpayers. From a human rights perspective, the number of times that enforcement officers were acting as the adjudicating authority would be diminished. That is best left to judicial proceedings. Visas would begin to change the assumptions of both the Border Patrol and the public that everyone with brown skin is here illegally.

No one questions that there is a huge population of non-citizens who wish to come to the United States to work here legally. A new system of incorporating these workers into the U.S. economy would be of mutual interest and significant in outcomes. A migrant once asked me if the U.S. wants workers, why does the U.S. make it so damn hard to get to work? Good question.

The creation of a new visa program would address mutual concerns. Integrating our economies with neighbors to the south would help many segments of the U.S. economy including construction, landscaping, hospitality, caregiving, and more. Many of the people who are currently crossing the deserts in the southwest United States are perfect matches for employers in these sectors. They are not terrorists. I agree that there are people crossing the border that are not people we would choose to be here. But, on average, the persons who do cross the border are healthier and more responsible than U.S. citizens.

The Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986 and the implementation of its legalization program showed policy makers and public administrators who supervised the program a lot about how to process millions of immigrants into programs. Nonprofit organizations helped migrants prepare documents and how to prepare for interviews. The interviews were typically done in groups of migrants appearing before a bureaucrat who oversaw compliance with the program requirements.

What we commonly call vetting today was accomplished, background checks reviewed, impromptu questions were asked. We learned from that program just how public-private partnerships could achieve results. The legalization program removed many of the objections the public held concerning the rising percentage of foreign-born people living in the U.S.

The people who migrate, whether legally or illegally, have been studied at length by historians, social scientists, medical personnel, and others. Social scientists, criminologists, and others have studied the systems that either allowed migrants to enter the United States or the systems that have been used to enforce laws. In general, those who are allowed to participate in the economy, to move freely in the communities, and to work fare the best. They make purchases, use cellphones, join community groups and expand their social connections. Ironically, in today’s technology, the more they participate in the economy and in the community, the more visible they are to law enforcement.

People do respond to economic incentives. If progress is to be made in adapting to migration and to benefit from migration, more market-oriented incentives need to be designed to produce mutual benefits. The proposal below would introduce the first-ever economic incentive for migrants to comply with the terms of a visa.

Few people would argue that the Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA) is a simple set of statutes that are easy to follow. The INA provides life-time employment for thousands of immigration attorneys, judges, courts, and paralegals. Reform of the INA, at least in the case of the undocumented living in the U.S., could be achieved by changing just a few variables. Keeping it simple must be a major goal. Changing the laws is just part of the work. Implementing the changes is a major objective. If the changes are simple, the prospects of successful implementation are greater. Ideally, much of the implementation of immigration reform could be dealt with administratively rather than in the cumbersome, time-consuming system of hearings and court proceedings we currently use.

The two largest groups of people that must be considered in immigration reform are those who are already residing in the United States and those who want to come and participate in the economy by working here. Smaller groups include those in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, those with temporary protected status, those who are seeking asylum, those who are refugees. Some 100 different visas exist today to cover this case or that case, this exception or that one. The thrust of this proposal is that in the two largest groups, the U.S. could choose to make the system very simple, and the promise of reforming the system to address these two groups could be extended to the ways in which we think of other groups.

Implementing the new program begins with an interview. Having prepared documents, the migrant appears before a Citizenship and Immigration Services representative, possibly in a group of other migrants. Mexican officials told me more than 15 years ago that the Mexican government would open their criminal databases for viewing by U.S. officials if doing that would help secure status for their nationals.

The purpose of the interview is to discover and record many things. The interviewer asks about the person and/or the family. Are there children? What are their ages? Where are they on their educational journey? What is the migrant’s employment? How long does the migrant want to reside in the United States?

Vetting (or the lack thereof) is one of the biggest issues for the public. What many do not understand is that refugees and asylum-seekers go through very intense vetting. The interviews can be as extensive as deemed warranted. Once vetted, visas can be issued and/or renewed for a lengthy period, say two to fifteen years. Radically, and rapidly, reducing the size of the undocumented population living and working in the United States should never be a goal of the administration. President Trump’s stated and perceived goals of removing brown people from the U.S. would have a very deleterious effect upon the economy. With the new visas in hand, the migrant could travel back and forth to see families, take care of emergencies, even seek healthcare. Airlines would be selling tickets, fewer migrants would be in this country in the moment, and the door would be opened to restore circularity and to reduce the chances a migrant would be receiving free services.

The U.S. Labor Department could set quotas based upon comprehensive data. Quotas could be set for several sectors of the economy: construction, agriculture, service, hospitality, and more.

In exchange for receiving the new visas which makes the migrant’s presence in the United States lawful, the migrant can reasonably be required to secure drivers’ licenses, car insurance, health insurance, and any other requirements that will make their presence in the United States more acceptable to critics. During the time of the visa, the migrant can begin their application for citizenship. This is a feature of the Immigration and Naturalization Act now, but in this case, the migrant with the new visa would be exempt from the worldwide quota of visas. If the time needed to become a citizen is longer than the time left on the visa, the application to become a citizen can continue in absentia. In other words, if the migrant complies with the term of the visa and goes home, that behavior would support the application for citizenship.

With a new supply of secure visas, migrants would be enabled to travel freely, buy cars, start businesses, and more. I’ve met migrants with hundreds of thousands of dollars in U.S. banks. They would be empowered to safely purchase homes. That would greatly strengthen the economy and increase the stake the migrant has in complying with the terms of their visas.

In the case of those who want to travel to the United States and work, migrants could be screened in countries of origin. Working with U.S. Department of State embassies in countries of origin, new agencies would be established to achieve all the goals listed above while the migrant is still outside of the United States. The sending country could certify the migrants in terms of criminal backgrounds, health, and their financial stake in returning to the country. Educational backgrounds, work experiences, skill certifications, and more could be ascertained to help establish their suitability for employers.

Labor organizations, trade unions, and other groups would be able to work with migrants in the country or origin to prepare migrants for work inside the United States. The history of support for migration varies across U.S. labor organizations. The teamsters and SEIU vary in their ideas of how immigration laws should be enforced and/or reformed. The point is, however, it would be beneficial to the migrants and to the unions or trade groups to prepare prior to the migrant’s journey to the U.S. Migrants could be ready to work from day one.

Perhaps the signature contribution I have made to the conversations about immigration reform for 25 years is the idea of establishing a financial incentive for compliance with the terms of the visa. I propose that migrants be required to establish an account with an initial deposit of money equivalent to the average cost of crossing the border today. At this writing, migrants pay cartels at least $7,000 to cross the border.

The U.S. establishes that as the base for migrants to open their accounts, accounts that are opened even before they come to the border. With certification for work in the U.S. and with the account established, the migrant does not need the services of the cartels. The migrant is free to travel unencumbered north to a port of entry. Literally billions of dollars a year would be removed from the cash flows of trans-national criminal organizations.

Immigration authorities could establish offices in a few of the many ports of entry that would be authorized to process these newly qualified migrants. While it is possible to link prospective employers with the newly certified migrants, many would be free to search for employment. These new visa holders would be treated more like high-tech workers who can arrive with their certifications and visas, bring their families, rent apartments, and seek employment.

Once employed using their new documents, the arriving migrants would have their employers withhold, say 10%, of their gross earnings which would be added to their account. Individual migrant accounts begin with the $7,000 deposit and accrue 10% of earnings over the term of the visas. These accounts could easily grow to be $15,000-$30,000 over the term of the visa. That is a substantial amount compared to the annual incomes of the traditional sending communities.

Here's the kicker. If the migrant does not comply with the terms of the visa and transfer the money home, the funds are forfeited to law enforcement. The migrant will have self-adjudicated, making him or her a federal fugitive. Currently, a deportation costs more than $17,000. The forfeited funds would be roughly equivalent. In this case, the U.S. is not paying for a deportation. The U.S. is using the migrant’s own money to pay for apprehension and deportation.

In this system, the U.S. government knows where the migrant is, who the migrant is working for. The sending country knows. The migrant’s family knows. When the visa expires, the migrant reports to the authorized port of entry. The money is electronically transferred home, and the migrant goes home. Again, this would be the first-ever economic incentive for compliance with the terms of the visa.

Structuring new visas in this manner would be the beginning of a Marshall Plan for the western hemisphere. Systematically, billions of dollars would be distributed to the sending countries instead of to the cartels. The money would be going into the lowest levels of the economies south of us. The U.S. would also be exporting English, business practices, skills, knowledge, and abilities. This system is a developmental system designed to integrate our economies even further.

If anyone has ever visited major cities south of the U.S. border, they see thousands of U.S. franchise stores. The largest corporation in all of Mexico is Walmart. Monies sent back to Mexico, for instance, would be spent in U.S.-based corporations and circulate in such a way as to enrich U.S. corporate investors. This plan creates new markets.

If a much higher percentage of the undocumented persons already living in the U.S. and 100% of those who are seeking to participate in the U.S. economy are doing so legally, the scope and mission of U.S. border law enforcement would change. Fewer personnel would be needed. The focus could shift to the search for terrorists and other persons the U.S. can legitimately seek to exclude. The burdens upon agents, search and rescue, transportation, processing, immigration courts, and deportations would dramatically be reduced at an enormous savings to the U.S. taxpayer.

To be clear, this plan enables the U.S. to achieve a much higher level of national security than the current system. Authorities would know who is in the U.S., where they work, where they are from, who they are connected to.

By setting quotas and establishing certifications to work, U.S. employers would have a much greater flexibility in filling positions in their companies. Employers, too, would be able to achieve a much higher compliance with laws concerning the employment of foreign nationals.

Basic rights and protections for the migrants would be enhanced. The migrants would have work authorization. They would not be as afraid of law enforcement. Since they hold their visas – instead of their employers – the migrants would be free to secure employment elsewhere if their workplace became hostile, or unsafe. Migrants would be free to report workplace violations.

With this system, migrants would have a larger stake in their own work success. Additionally, migrants would share more of the costs of participating in the U.S. economy, and cartel revenues would drop dramatically.

Having been certified in a country of origin, migrants would be able to use public transportation in Mexico and upon entering the U.S. They would no longer need the services of the cartels; Border Patrol agents would not have to tear across the deserts disrupting pristine terrain trying to apprehend migrants. Migrant deaths would diminish. Families would remain intact. Employers would be able to navigate the employment system. Human rights would expand.

The dominant law-enforcement-only system we now employ reveals a stunning lack of imagination of how to adapt to the migration, workforce needs, human rights, and the criminality and corruption that comes with the current law-enforcement-only approach. With imagination, the U.S. could pursue a bi-partisan approach that listens to scholars, civil society, activists, and other experts who aren’t selling surveillance technologies, running for office, and otherwise making money from the corrupt and broken system we now pursue.

Adopting just a few new concepts, especially the creation of new visas and the introduction of economic incentives to comply with visas, the U.S. would reduce conflict in the national and local discourse over immigration. We could regularize migration, reduce border enforcement costs to U.S. taxpayers, reduce violence along both sides of the border, keep families together, and reduce incarcerations. Expenses for health and education could be dramatically reduced in border counties. Both expenses and risks could be reduced in local jurisdictions.

What’s not to like?

TERMINOLOGY AND COMMENTS

**MASKED AGENTS** The Department of Homeland Security and its many agencies are hiring thousands of employees to kidnap persons off the streets, out of the courtrooms, inside hospitals, schools, and congregations with no deference to legal status to comply with political goals of the White House. They do so with huge economic incentives (bounties) that enrich private corporations with DHS contracts. They have very little training. Masks are worn as part of a political spectacle.

**DOXING** is a term used to describe identifying masked agents and making their personal information public such as names, ages, addresses, family information, and actual employers. It is a strategy of resistance.

**TROJAN HORSES** So-called agents are using private vehicles, rental vans, and trucks to reduce their visibility to the public in order to achieve an advantage of surprise while conducting raids.

**ROOSEVELT RESERVATION** The word reservation is a technical word used in land management that is most frequently used to refer to native American homelands. However, it is also the word to designate forests, public lands, and special use designations. The Roosevelt Reservation is a sixty-foot-wide strip of land that conforms to the U.S. southern border from near El Paso, Texas to near San Diego, California. The government has now declared this strip of land to be an extension of military bases to deploy U.S. armed forces to assist in law enforcement activities to control migration. The use of heavy vehicles along the border comes with an enormous environmental cost and continues militarization of the border.

**SHOUT TEST** Border Patrol agents were once required to ask every migrant if he or she had a fear of being returned to their country of origin. Agents had to ask even before apprehending the migrant. The burden has shifted, not by law, but by practice. Now, the migrant must declare if he or she has that fear. It is now said that migrants must “shout out” that they are seeking asylum.

**CLASSIFICATION** Presidents have the power to classify migrants and their behaviors. Clinton famously reclassified bad behavior of migrants, behavior that in no way compares to the bad behavior of citizens. Classifications have consequences just like First, Second and Third Class on the Titanic. We all know that First Class passengers fared a lot better than Third Class passengers. Clinton turned misdemeanors into aggravated felonies in his horrible 1996 legislation, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). Imagine your drunken neighbor taking a swing at you. You are an immigrant and respond in kind and in self-defense. Karen photographs it. What a police officer would have previously classified as a misdemeanor now becomes an aggravated felony. You’re deported and removed from your spouse, children, job, and more.

**ALIEN** This term appears a lot in the Immigration and Naturalization Act and refers to noncitizens. The word “alien” was used often in the King James Version of the Bible. Today, it is considered offensive in many circles. In fact, due to the science fiction genre of literature and film, it makes one think of little green men from outer space. In any case, it is a term that should not be used unless in a courtroom setting where the arcane laws are still quoted.

**AMNESTY** Amnesty is a bogus take on mercy. It refers to a pardon for a crime. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan’s immigration reform was referred to as an amnesty. Today, it is a derogatory word used to describe any attempt to provide relief to a migrant group.

**ASYLUM SEEKER/ASYLEE** Asylum law dates to common law and even into ancient scripture. Asylum extends protection to a person who is afraid of returning to the country of their citizenship.

**BIRTHRIGHT CITIZENSHIP** Currently a hotly contested concept in law, birthright citizenship is found in the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Citizenship is based on Jus Soli – law of the soil, and Jus Sangre – law of the blood. Jus Soli refers to someone being born on U.S.-governed land and by extension a U.S.-flagged plane, ship, or embassy, for example. Jus Sangre refers to being born to or “related” to someone who is a U.S. citizen. The U.S. is one of several countries in the world that use either or both as a basis for citizenship. Each must be kept as a feature of immigration law to be consistent with the U.S. legal-political experiment.

In both cases, it’s complicated. Born on an American-flagged airplane: Basis for U.S. citizenship. Born in Azerbaijan to a U.S. citizen: Also, basis for U.S. citizenship. Born on U.S. soil, but not to a U.S. citizen: The child is returned to the country of origin and is raised there, deprived of U.S. laws, protections, healthcare, education, on and on. Then, at 21 years of age, he or she can petition for citizenship. The U.S. system has produced hundreds of thousands of children with this status. I refer to them as American refugees.

**CATCH AND RELEASE** A fishing term applied to apprehending, processing, and releasing migrants into the supervision of the courts. The term is most used by law enforcement to refer to asylum seekers. When BP and ICE want to enforce laws, they rarely refer to enforcing refugee and asylum law.

**GOT-AWAYS** Refers to people that law enforcement didn’t catch. It is based on the false assumption that law enforcement once had them in control. A spokesperson talking about got-aways is like a football coach talking about touchdowns the team didn’t make. Stupid.

**NATION** The United States of America is not a nation, at least according to any academic definition. Nations are usually based on languages, religions, races, ideologies, geographies, place of birth, and more. The U.S. is a country with geography, government, business, military, etc. Simply put, the U.S. is a legal-political experiment. Speakers urging protection of the nation need to be more specific about what they are saying.

**CHAIN MIGRATION** This concept refers to one person who becomes a citizen who, in turn, petitions for another family member, who. in turn, petitions for yet another. The problem with this concept is that the wait times for people to immigrate to the U.S. are incredibly long. Often, the child for whom a petition is filed might have a dozen birthdays between the filing of the petition and their first appearance in the court system. In the meantime, the child has “aged out” and is no longer eligible. There is not much chain migration, even though restrictionists often use the term.

**ANCHOR BABIES** This is a very derogatory term. The idea is that a mother (or a couple) come to the U.S., have a baby, then the child is automatically a citizen, and the child can petition for the parents to become citizens. In practice, the undocumented parent or parents are deported along with the infant. Only when the child becomes 21 years of age can he or she petition for citizenship.

**CBP** United States Customs and Border Patrol. Following 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security was formed. The previously separate agencies of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol were combined.

**BCIS** Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, the so-called benefit side of the Department of Homeland Security.

**DACA** Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program begun under then-President Barack Obama to extend protection from removal to children brought to the U.S. by their parents. Supporters of DACA have to date been unable to leverage those protections into statutory protection.

**DREAMERS** The people who are now or were under the temporary protection of DACA. The real dreamers were the politicians who thought they could tinker with immigration policy in the face of the Red State-Main Street Republicans who continue to colonize immigration policy.

**EWI** Entry without inspection. When a migrant, or anyone for that matter, enters a port of entry, he or she is inspected. Not so if one enters the U.S. between the ports of entry. EWI is an administrative violation, not even a misdemeanor or felony.

**9/11** This was the convenient excuse for reorganizing EVERYTHING related to immigration, which amounted to a huge power grab.

**EMPLOYMENT BASED IMMIGRATION** If you want to understand the immigration system, you must read up on some 100 different visas. However, some visas are specifically for high-tech workers, the kind you might associate with Silicon Valley. But other highly skilled workers fall into this category. Visas exist for what are generally called low-skilled workers in agriculture and service industries. (However, those who create visas and call them low-skilled have probably never worked a damned day in their lives.)

**FAMILY-BASED IMMIGRATION** The immigration law reforms signed in 1965 focused in part on family reunification, giving preference to spouses, parents, and children with the intention of keeping nuclear families together. Family-based immigration is an ongoing part of U.S. immigration law every day. However, all you hear about in the news is illegal immigration.

**IRA-SQUARED LAW** The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 reimagined the whole concept of aggravated felonies. As mentioned earlier, what would be a misdemeanor for a U.S. citizen became a felony for a migrant, making the migrant eligible to be removed from the U.S. The most important feature of this law was the creation of bars against reentering the U.S. There are variations, but generally one can be barred from reentry for 5 years, 10 years, or forever.

**EMPLOYMENT VERIFICATION** This movement is worthless. People living in Mexico know more about the employment market in certain neighborhoods of major cities in the U.S. than does the U.S. Labor Department. Employment verification is really data collection to aid future prosecutions filled with false assumptions.

**IMMIGRATION BARS** One of the most egregious ways to make life miserable for migrants through family separation. Imagine being here for 20 years and having employment, a family, a home, and more. Then you are removed from the U.S. and barred from reentry for 10 years. That’s a great thing for the government to do to dependent children, isn’t it?

**ICE** U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Abolish ICE!

**IMMIGRATION COURTS** Kangaroo courts that operate under the illusion of Title III U.S. courts. A few courts along the border once bridged the difference between immigration law and Title III courts in a program called Operation Streamline that took administration violations, prosecuted violators, and imposed prison time and/or imposed bars against reentry. Operation Streamline was dismantled during the COVID-19 epidemic. However, immigration courts can still perform some of the same functions today at the discretion of the courts.

**IMMIGRATION JUDGES** Most are poorly trained administrative law judges equipped with life-or-death judgment powers.

**LPRs** Lawful permanent residents. These are immigrants who have successfully met the requirements to be in the U.S. and work here. They hold the so-called green cards (which are actually pink now.)

**MERIT-BASED IMMIGRATION** The idea behind “merit-based” language is to create a filter to admit only those who will bring value to the economy. This idea appeals most to those who hold most migrants in very low esteem.

**COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM** A term of art that has specific meaning known only to the speaker of the term. Any time it is used in conversation, one must ask specifically what is meant. No two candidates for office agree on what the term means. See: IMMIGRATION REFORM.

**JOURNALISTS** Increasingly, this is a term of art. We have legacy media, social media, freelance media, and on and on. When it comes to journalists, I love ’em, and I hate ’em. I was one. Some are a whole lot better educated than others. Because I was trained as a journalist and hold a degree in journalism, I know how to size up journalists. Plus, I’ve been interviewed more than a thousand times – my record was 18 interviews in one day! Foreign journalists are usually better. They ask me about philosophy, what things mean, how they work. Too many U.S. journalists just re-work press releases and quote local players for color and balance. Nonetheless, without journalists there will never be any reform of migration policies in the U.S.

**WOKE** “We only know everything.” Just kidding. Woke generally refers to attitudes and discourse derived from oppression due to human attributes. Woke is not a bad term, but it confuses reform discourse.

**IMMIGRATION REFORM** A term that means only what the speaker gives it. It could mean anything from promoting restrictionist policies to open borders. When you hear the word, start asking questions to find out what the speaker is talking about. Generally, piecemeal vs. comprehensive.

See: COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM.

**BORDER PATROL COUNTING** Customs and Border Protection counts a lot of things. The problem is it distorts numbers and shares very little of what it counts or how it counts. The counting of people and incidents by ICE and BP is utterly flawed social science. Agents count like this: eenie, meenie, 12, Google, 42, 18. Numbers reported by the Border Patrol in particular – and then, reported in local media – as statistics are famously bad or even horrendous social science.

**IMMIGRATION REFORM PROPOSALS** Immigration reform is not some ideal. It is a variable with infinite meanings. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of immigration reform proposals. Most are sitting on library shelves or on hard drives just waiting for the next legislative window as determined by policymakers, not constituents. Nearly everyone agrees that immigration policies need reform. Very few agree about how to do that. Each time a quoted source mentions immigration reform, ask what the speaker means or ask the reporter what the speaker meant. Unfortunately, some of the reporters don’t know.

**ELECTED OFFICIALS** Persons who have won the mythical combat of an election are not leaders. We call them that, but they are not. They are followers in the sense that they speak, act, and propose only in response to the noise that constituents make. True, an elected official may sign onto or propose a piece of legislation, but that proposal came from interested parties – usually well-financed and usually from their districts or states or ideological think tanks. The idea for social movement progress is for one to act locally in such a way that people around the world can see the meaning of the act. In theory, that

approach is called everyday cosmopolitanism. (See: ROBIN HOOVER. He was called an “everyday cosmopolitan” in an Arizona State University Ph.D. dissertation. It’s a sociology term.)

**IDENTITY** Imagine a knight in the time of King Arthur stopping a peasant, raising his visor, and asking for an ID card. Bureaucrats and law enforcement love the concept, but the reality is that the personal responsibility requirement of an ID is the giving of immense authority to poorly trained enforcement officers who are bound to abuse it. And, as George Carlin advised, never underestimate large groups of stupid people. I watched a Tucson police officer pull a woman over for a tail-light violation. He knew he didn’t have the authority to do anything about her inability to speak English, so he called the Border Patrol and illegally detained the woman until Border Patrol arrived. About three hours later, I saw the woman in Mexico 70 miles away at the border, where she told me her full story. In this instance, a local traffic cop had successfully deported a migrant with the help of Border Patrol. The knight put the peasant out of the shire. No one was served.

**HEGEMONY** The U.S. is systematically extending its influence to the ends of the earth. Sometimes you hear the term “isolationist.” In truth, the U.S. has never had a time when it was isolationist. The U.S. doesn’t particularly want to be a colonial power, at least the kind that occupies other countries. Instead, it controls ports, banking, investments, development, military, travel, trade, surveillance, and policing. I’ve encountered U.S. State Department “observers” thousands of miles south of the U.S. border in Mexico and Central America at migration and military (often the same) checkpoints. Some think this is as it should be, but it clearly militates against self-determination, a core U.S. value – at least one to which the U.S. pays lip service. Self-determination is certainly not a term used by the CIA or U.S. State Department, except when they’re trying to achieve some sort of legitimacy.

**FRONTIER VERSUS BORDER** The U.S. continues to push its functional borders far beyond the geographical limits of the country. Airline and maritime passengers are screened by U.S. personnel thousands of miles (even twelve thousand miles) from the U.S. prior to beginning their trips to the U.S. The United States is paying other governments to enforce our borders. The second Trump administration has been paying countries in Central America and Africa to receive deportees. In the spring of 2025, the U.S. was paying Panama to clamp down on the Darien Gap. The U.S. is using immense creativity to push frontiers way beyond our borders. Previously, the U.S. basically bought Guatemala a border patrol, equipping personnel with uniforms, weapons, radios, and vehicles.

**VISAS** The U.S. has approximately 100 different types of visas. Just one example: A special visa is needed for a Japanese businessperson switching planes at a U.S. airport and continuing on to Europe. Nearly all visas issued by the government are non-immigrant visas. That means that the person is not an immigrant. He or she has little or no hope whatsoever of ever becoming a U.S. citizen even if he or she is given permission to reside in the U.S. for a period of time.

**QUOTAS** The U.S. once based immigration policy on race. Preferences were given to certain – mostly European – nations. In the mid-1960s during the so-called Great Society period, equality was the word of the day. So, to make immigration fairer, the U.S. changed to a quota system based on country of origin. All countries were given a quota of some 40,000 people. That sounds nice, even woke, but ask a statistician. There’s nothing equal about that whatsoever. The Dominican Republic (population: 11.5 million) has the same quota allocated to it as does the much, much larger country of Mexico (pop: 132 million). The Dominican Republic never uses its quota, and Mexico would need millions more to be proportional.

**LAW ENFORCEMENT** What a concept. There is no one set way to organize law enforcement. In the U.S., law enforcement is decentralized. Agents and officers have explicit authority, power, and jurisdiction. They have paths toward long careers and a judiciary that generally upholds their judgements. Sheriffs look over the shoulders of FBI agents. District attorneys watch over all authorities. Courts back up officers and agents. Officers and agents can make a career and retire with benefits. In Mexico – and similarly in other countries south of the U.S. – law enforcement is very centralized, often nationalized. Corruption is facilitated by reporting all local law enforcement activity to central, often national, authorities. This makes corruption easier. All a cartel must do is bribe a few people in national offices to learn what is happening all around the country. Courts do not back-stop agents and officers. If one loses his or her job, retirement is not an option.

**BORDER POLICY** A vast system of human rights violations coordinated to result in a culture of cruelty not known since the Indian wars.

**CINCO DE MAYO** Besides being Karl Marx’s birthday, Cinco de Mayo was a minor battle won by Mexico that was reborn as a drinking holiday in the U.S. Some say it’s the day when we pay homage to all the migrants in the U.S.

**THE WALL** The basic Mexican cartel market infrastructure. The U.S. builds the wall, but the cartels use the wall to gather market share in smuggling migrants. Their share is now 100 percent. The walls have some effect on where smugglers choose to cross migrants into the U.S. They also drive up the cost for migrants to pay to cartels. It is the walls that make the use of cartels necessary. The walls keep people in instead of out. The expense and danger of migrants going back home and returning, as was the practice in the past, is now so high, migrants just wait out their seasonal work.

**SMUGGLERS** The Border Patrol is right that smugglers are often rapacious economic actors who do not respect the personhood and dignity of migrants. But smugglers are also often travel agents, personal bankers, and family friends or at least acquaintances. When a smuggler takes a group of any size through the desert, he or she (yes, there are a few women in the business), they assume the authority of a ship captain. They decide when to walk, when/where to sleep, when to eat and drink, what to wear, and more. The lives of the migrants are in the hands of the smugglers. Some are beneficent, others are assholes. The Border Patrol acts as though anything that goes wrong is the smugglers’ responsibility. In any case, it is not in the smugglers’ self-interest to lose a migrant in the desert. Simply put, it’s bad for business. When a smuggler starts out from Altar, Sonora, Mexico, with a group, he will return to the same community. There, he faces his mother, his church, his boss in the cartel. When the BP denounces smugglers, no thought is ever given to the lived experience of the smuggler.

**SURVEILLANCE** One of the fastest-growing industries in the U.S. is surveillance, intelligence, and data-sharing. Entrepreneurial contractors work with U.S. government authorities to use the border itself for research and development of technologies. The border is convenient for contractors because they do not have to hire actors to walk through areas being surveilled to test new technologies. The migrants walk through the areas, and the contractors test their equipment. Border counties and communities regularly lease huge areas of land for this kind of research and development. Companies test small drones above the leased land and on the border, then deploy them all around the world in support of the U.S. military.

**CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATIONS** Members of Congress routinely tour border installations to evaluate policy implementation, personnel deployments, equipment, and infrastructure. Yeah, yeah, sure. These are 99 percent photo ops used for electoral purposes, and rarely ever result in policy changes. Well, how do policy changes occur? Most of the time policy change comes through the budgetary process, primarily through budget requests from Border Patrol, Customs, and the Department of Homeland Security, sometimes from the West Wing of the White House.

**CONGRESSIONAL FIELD HEARINGS** These are public dramas, often spectacles with pre-determined outcomes. They are designed to leave a paper trail of legislators’ visits and to create predetermined press releases and videos that support legislators’ propaganda. I have both observed and participated in these. They take on the appearance of a court proceeding where the witnesses/speakers are sworn in to give testimony, even though many were invited to give testimony and not subpoenaed.

**ASYLEES VS. REFUGEES** Basically, they are the same. Refugees apply outside the United States for legal protections. They are screened outside the U.S. and usually must wait a long time to be approved for admission. Asylees apply for protections inside the U.S. There are more significant differences, though. Representatives of the U.S. State Department screen refugees. The Department of Homeland Security screens asylum applicants. Most of the time, the DHS representative is a poorly trained Border Patrol agent who has incentives to rapidly deport the applicant to Mexico or another country of origin. Administrations have been toying with creating offices in countries south of the U.S. to get migrants to apply for asylum there. The big problem with that is applicants must remain near those they fear. Administrations that try to convert asylum applicants into refugees are trying to lengthen the time of the application process, to lower the numbers that get reported in the media. The problem is that approach is contrary to asylum law. Justice delayed is justice denied. Changing procedures simply for the convenience of enforcement personnel is not consistent with the law. It amounts to, “I’d love to help you, but it’s inconvenient. Come back next year.” When an administration slows down the process to apply for asylum, it admits that the system is very broken and accepts the fact that migrants will simply choose instead to cross the desert. That puts a greater burden on Border Patrol enforcement and gives a wink of approval to the cartels that charge the asylum applicant huge sums to cross the desert and face the possibility of death. Rational Choice Theory tells us that parents with children will game the system by sending their

children through the port of entry where they are exempt from asylum quotas. The parent or parents will then pay coyotes (human smugglers) to help them cross the formidable desert, hoping somehow to reunite with the children.

**DE-MARKETING** Presidential administrations have incentives to deny applicants for asylum. Extending asylum protection enjoys less political support today than in previous decades. Often, administrations treat various groups otherwise eligible for benefits like customers or consumers. They attempt to de-market them by denying them access to benefits, moving them to locations where they can apply for benefits, and basically de-marketing U.S. core values by limiting the number of consumers. Instead of equal justice before the law, administrations are creating quotas. In 2024, the Biden administration set quotas for asylum applicants encountered at the border. If applicants exceed 2,500 in a week, the door is closed at the border for asylum applicants. Biden did not follow the law. Technically, persons can apply for asylum anywhere: at ports of entry, between ports of entry, at sea – anywhere. Administrations go out of their way to deny asylum applicants the protections of safety and security for which they are otherwise eligible. Administrations that de-market are not following U.S. asylum laws, and they are ignoring international laws and practices. Biden’s Executive Order included these words: This order is signed to “discourage irregular migration by encouraging migrants to use lawful, safe, and orderly processes for entering the United States.” It sounds nice, but drilling down in the document, one reads that it means presenting oneself at a port of entry – when the quota for accepting asylum seekers is low – and/or using a CBP telephone or computer application, which has serious flaws. The problem with that is that a group of fifty migrants crossing the border at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona who want to apply for asylum ARE in full compliance with U.S. asylum law. The asylum law does not limit the numbers of asylum seekers, the place where they make their appeal, how old they are, or any other element.

**MS ST. LOUIS** One of the most tragic incidents in U.S. history was when the government turned away more than 900 refugees on the German ocean liner St. Louis because they were Jews. Upon return, at least a third were murdered by Nazi authorities. Similarly, the U.S. has turned away boatloads of Haitians and Cubans without complying with asylum law.

**PUSH FACTORS** Migrants are fleeing American-made bombs, American corporations, American-caused climate change, American neoliberal economics. So, why do migrants go to the United States for relief? It’s for the same reasons many former colonists migrate to the empire that colonized their country: Migrants migrate to reunite with family, to work for employers with which they are familiar, for language, for religion, and more. The movement of migrants from colonies to the countries of colonizers happens around the world.

**IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE)** These are the people who arrest Daddy in the parking lot of Home Depot while Daddy’s son waits in the pickup truck. Using paramilitary agents to do interior enforcement is simply not the American way.

**IMMIGRATION COURTS** (again) Franz Kafka’s “Das Schloss” comes to mind. I sat in an immigration court in South Texas one day and watched a horror drama play out in front of me. An administrative law judge from Alaska had pissed off a superior and was sent from Alaska to South Texas to work. Originally French Canadian, he spoke 300+ words per minute. No translator in the room. In front of me were seven men from El Salvador wearing orange inmate clothing. They spoke very little English. The judge decided to play Simon Says, a famous child’s game. He started talking fast. Hell, I couldn’t make out what he was saying. He finished with, “If you agree with this statement, raise your right hand.” They all look to one guy. He raises his hand. Rinse and repeat. Blah, blah, blah, “If you agree with this statement, stand up.” They look. He stands. They all stand. Third time: Failure. I could see and hear the airplane on the runway with the engines running. Off they went to El Salvador. In the next courtroom, I witnessed an administrative law judge, a migrant, and a volunteer advocate telling the judge she had a letter from a Dallas attorney willing to represent the migrant if the judge would grant a change of venue. The judge knows the volunteer is connected. Away the migrant goes on an adventure to Dallas, and most likely, a long life in the United States. The immigration courts are a sham, a clearinghouse that makes decisions based on what the judge had for breakfast or how the judge thinks his or her actions will be interpreted by their bosses and/or civil society. Your presence in the courtroom puts the judges on their best behavior.

**IMMIGRATION JUDGES** Administrative law judges are not trained as judges as most people know or think of judges. They preside and try the person before them at the same time, with far less attention to procedure, facts, evidence, or other input. Until the U.S. decides to put immigration courts and personnel into the Title III system, there will be no justice in the immigration system.

**IMMIGRATION AND NATIONALITY ACT (INA)** The INA is a hodge-podge of Congressional Band-Aids designed to work as a systematic corpus of law. The biggest problem is that it was written in 1950, and it changes every day at the speed of a fax machine or the sending of an email that turns everything on its head. The problem with doing a rewrite is that Congress almost always extends more discretion at the lowest level of the system to enable employees to deport or remove people who should be receiving protection through the system. Some elements of the INA are enforceable through the administrative courts and some through the Title III civil and criminal provisions. Radically different outcomes result.

**IMMIGRATION REFORM AND CONTROL ACT (IRCA) (1986)** (again) This was the most recent major change in immigration law. Through this legislation some three million migrants were legalized and given status. About 40 percent of those eventually became citizens.

**CONSEQUENCING** A fancy word for punishment. “If this, then that” thinking which reminds me of the Code of Hammurabi: If you steal this, then we’re going to cut off your hand. CBP makes life so difficult for a particular migrant that that migrant will never choose again to try and cross the border. I sat in a CBP conference room in its Washington conference room and asked them: How do your consequence numbers compare to the birthrate of the sending countries? In other words, do you really think those numbers in any way deter the flow of migrants? And at what cost?

**ICE AIR** Slave (air)ships that send slaves (migrants) home to their countries of origin. When the Border Patrol first started flying migrants deep into Mexico’s interior, I talked to a few migrants about their flights. I understood a whole lot when one migrant told me he volunteered to go back: he’d never flown in an airplane.

**REPATRIATION FLIGHTS** Some flights now originate in foreign countries – notably Mexico – but are paid for by U.S. tax dollars. ICE AIR shackles migrants into their seats on jet aircraft like slaves and flies them to an airport in a country of origin where Interpol and other law enforcement entities screen the new arrivals. U.S. adjudication extends way beyond U.S. borders.

**BORDER PATROL ARRESTS** No, not of migrants, arrests of agents. Border Patrol agents are five times as likely to be arrested than any other federal, state, or local law enforcement agents or officers. Collectively, Border Patrol agents have a longer rap sheet than any law enforcement agency in the U.S. What’s the number one reason? Horrible recruiting and training. The Border Patrol Academy should be shut down until Congress can decide on a curriculum, an appropriate length of time to train agents, and a process whereby agents can be screened prior to acceptance to the academy. Small cities train police for many, many weeks and often many months longer that the U.S. trains Border Patrol agents. CBP keeps lowering the education requirements and raising sign-on bonuses and frequently hires former military with little training.

**DISPLACED PERSONS** Worldwide, some 110 million persons are displaced, often stateless. People are migrating at record numbers. There was a time from 1800 to 1900 when three-quarters of all the people in the world who were emigrating were emigrating to the United States, and they were emigrating to a country that was much smaller than it is today. Contrast that with the fact that the U.S. has also not just received millions of migrants, it has deported or removed more people than any other nation. Some estimates are that the U.S. has forcefully removed more than 50 million people.

**FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION** Since migration data have been gathered, the proportion of persons living in the United States who were born in another country has varied between 10 and 15 percent with a few higher, temporary spikes. Scholars associate higher percentages with increased resentment of those born in the U.S.

**NATIVE AMERICANS** Today we associate that term to the indigenous living in the U.S. However, the term came into its biggest usage in the late 1800s in self-reference to people who resented the arrival of new immigrants. Their bragging ended with, “I’m a native American,” meaning “I was born here.” In the late 1800s if you heard the term native American it was usually referring to white people born in New England.

**TERRITORY** Often used to refer to a sovereign country, territory is derived from a Latin word from which is also derived the word terror. Think of it in animal terms: “Don’t corner that animal, he’ll get territorial.”

**JUS SOLI** (again) “How did you become a citizen?” “Well, like wealth, I inherited it!”

**COLONIALISM** The most destructive force in human history. The U.S. still practices settler colonialism, only now the practice is primarily economic and militaristic.

**THE OPEN BORDER** In the 2000s I took a photographer on an exceptionally long day trip to the desert to photograph water stations using an old-fashioned 6x9 camera on a wooden tripod. He also photographed migrant trash to show that migrants had been there and a GPS readout at each location to show the distance from the border to the water station. The idea was to show just how permeable the border really is. To put it in philosophical terms, the photo shoot was about alterity and how relatively easy it was to penetrate fortress America even post 9/11. The border is penetrable, and not just by young, strong guys wanting to work. One day my wife found a baby stroller some 30 miles north of the border.

**PREVENTION THROUGH DETERRENCE** This is a policy that does not work and will not work in the future. The Border Patrol is four to five times larger now than in 2000. Billions of dollars’ worth of infrastructure is in place, including 700 miles of the border wall. Billions have been spent on repatriation, flying migrants around the world, using surveillance, and more. Yet, more attempts at crossing have occurred in recent years on an annual basis than were attempted in the early 2000s.

**ALTAR VALLEY NUMBERS** More migrating people have entered the U.S. through Southern Arizona’s Altar Valley than ever went through Ellis Island.

**TYPES OF CONSEQUENCING** Consequencing is a term of art used by the Border Patrol to politely refer to punishing migrants and abusing their human rights. **Lateral repatriations** dump migrants into the hands of competing cartels. Cartels are plural: The cartel that controls Laredo, Texas, is not the same as the cartel that controls Tijuana, Baja California. So, the Border Patrol knows where you crossed the border. It returns you to a different area controlled by a different cartel. You made arrangements with your cartel to try to cross you up to three times. Now you must make other arrangements or pay to travel to the original cartel you were working with. **Family separations** disrupt families and increase costs. Separating families for repatriation increases the likelihood of rape, disappearance, and other traumas. Border Patrol returns a wife to Laredo and a husband to Tijuana to punish and disrupt the smuggling operation. It’s cruel and unusual, but we thought of it. Imagine sitting in Washington, D.C. and dreaming up stuff like this. If you can think of it, you’re thinking like a CIA agent. During **detention prior to court** at the discretion of CBP, migrants spend time in detention before attending proceedings in immigration courts. This supports the prison industry that contracts with providers to fill more than 40,000 beds. **Prison sentencing** is a special CBP Consequencing schemes in which government prosecutors can attempt (often with success) to persuade a judge to give what must be perceived as a very harsh sentence aimed purely as punishment, plus bars that will go into effect once the migrant is deported.

**SENDING MESSAGES** Legislators and public administrators alike think they can send a message to targeted populations south of our border like advertisers do for consumers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not one study concludes that consequencing and sending messages has any effect on the numbers of people who enter the U.S. without inspection.

**BORDERS AREN’T NORMAL OR “NATURAL”** Many examples exist of walled cities and fortified borders in history. That has not been the case in the U.S. until recent decades, when the U.S. chose to militarize the southwest border. The militarization happened at the same time that the U.S. was engaged in armed conflicts in the Middle East. Much military technology research and development has been done on the southwest border.

Enforcement of the borders of the U.S. has some precedence, dating back to the 1800s, but enforcement as we know it has only been common since I became an adult. Anything that young can be changed or abolished.

**BORDERS ARE A NEW PHENOMENON** It is true that the biblical character Abraham was an ancient surveyor. He built a shrine here, an altar there. Pretty soon, according to many, he had laid out the boundaries of the so-called Holy Land. In modern times, some 40 percent of all the national boundaries in the world were drawn by either the British or the French. And, strangely, without any deference to the people living on the land, the lines were drawn in straight lines in smoke-filled rooms with people using rulers on flat maps. Little concern was shown for the affected people.

**DISPLACED PERSONS** My father was a member of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA. Unlike Europe following the war, the Pacific Theater had almost no displaced persons. Significant efforts were made to repatriate people, especially Filipinos. My father worked alongside the brother of then-President Ferdinand Marcos. My dad constantly looked over his shoulder because Marcos had a higher price on his head than Adolph Hitler ever did. Working with migrants is not for the faint of heart.

**THE ONE, THE FEW, THE MANY** (Known in academics as the unit of analysis) When you read statistics, evaluate programs, or do any kind of analysis, you must know if the question or the system is dealing with just one person, a group, or everyone.

**UNIONS** Both the United States and Mexico have many trade unions. Some support migrants, others don’t. A colleague of mine hosted a busload of union stewards in South Texas. They wouldn’t get out of the bus for fear they would get their Italian shoes dirty. The SEIU, on the other hand, organizes and marches for migrants. Hello, all unions, if you want to work for migrants, your allies work on Wall Street.

**MIGRANTS TAKE JOBS** No. They don’t. They add to the economy in every conceivable way. Read Aviva Chomsky’s “They Take Our Jobs! And 20 Other Myths About Immigration.”

**COSTS OF IMMIGRATION** If anyone brings this up, they’re against migrants. Fact: the U.S. makes out like a bandit on immigration. During the Clinton administration, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan testified to Congress that undocumented labor contributed 5 percent to the economy in one year. Also, a fact: The southern border counties and communities suffer the greatest economic burdens, but primarily because of geography and the requirement for local governments to absorb costs like unreimbursed health care. Another fact: The biggest expense is to taxpayers, who pay billions of dollars for unnecessary law enforcement.

**GUEST WORKERS** One can find horror stories and miracle stories about guest workers from around the world. I support the idea very much if it is done well. I encountered a large group of tall Black men and women who had left Africa to work in Brazil to build Olympic sports venues. They were all well dressed, with gold watches, the latest shoes, and cell phones. With promises of work in the U.S., they were migrating through Central America to work. They knew where they were going and who they would be working with – they just had to get across the border.

**MARIEL BOATLIFT VS. THE ARIZONA DESERT** During the Mariel boatlift (1979) some 125,000 Cubans made their way to Florida, mostly Miami, over a period of some six months. In the spring of 2002, 6,000 migrants crossed the Arizona border daily, mostly in the Avra Valley southwest of Tucson. As they say, “Do the math.” That means some 336,000 people crossed the border in a span of 56 days. The Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol acknowledged that it was hopeful to think it was apprehending even half of the migrants crossing in some of those corridors. Further west, the apprehension rate was in single digits. Fortunately, fewer people were crossing in the far west desert of the sector. In any case, the U.S. has had far larger influxes of migrants than in that often-studied Mariel boatlift. Suffice it to say that some 600,000 migrants crossed the border in Arizona that year, a number greater than the number of people living in the city of Tucson, Arizona.

**THE GAUNTLET** Activists have long characterized U.S. immigration enforcement efforts as a filter to screen out unwanted persons in the migration. The young, the female, the infirm, the elderly were apprehended, and the young, strong men made it. Anyone successfully running the gauntlet that included treacherous terrain, including rivers and deserts, a harsh climate, and few resources lead to future workers for the U.S. and breadwinners for the family back home. Deal. Never mind the costs for enforcement, the devastating effects on the health of the migrants, the deaths, and the untold strains on migrant families and their relatives in the U.S. Deterrence reinforced by random death is hardly a way to create public policy.

**THE WALL** Contrary to popular opinion, border walls keep migrants in the U.S. instead of keeping them out. Since about 2006, when wall-building really got underway, the average time a migrant stayed in the U.S. grew from some 18 months to more than nine years. The presence of the walls, the rise of the cartels, and the increase in numbers of border agents made it too dangerous and too expensive for migrants to go home, see the family, help mom, and then to come back next season. Border enforcement has broken the back of the phenomenon of circularity, which was a feature of the migration for decades during which migrants would come to the U.S. and work for a season or for a longer period, go home, then come back. Migrants want to come and go. I once stopped and talked to a migrant walking south near the border. Turns out he was going across the border to get cheap dental care, something healthcare tourists in the U.S. often do.

**IT'S THE LAW!** Relatively speaking, border enforcement laws haven’t been around all that long. The laws and policies are not fixed and immutable. Laws, policies, and practices are changed almost daily by Congress, the administration, Department of Homeland Security, and Border Patrol sector chiefs acting with discretion. The laws can change or be repealed.

**THE WORD MIGRANT** The U.S. Coast Guard began using the word “migrant” as early as 1928, possibly earlier. People encountered at sea were called migrants because the word described what they were doing rather than who they were. In a time of arguably extreme identity politics, referencing a behavior instead of a legal status is preferrable. The term “illegal” is legally nonsensical, insensitive, pejorative, nationalist, and so loaded at times that it rivals the N-word. According to law, a person can do an illegal act, but a person cannot be illegal. A moment for arrogation: Cari Skogberg turned her dissertation from the University of Colorado into a book entitled “Shaping the Immigration Debate: Contending Civil Societies on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” In the book, she credits me for the media

changing the use of “illegal” to “migrant” to refer to people who were in the U.S. I have argued this with Sean Hannity several times. There is no such thing as an illegal person. Yes, people can do illegal things, but no human is illegal.

**THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE BORDER** The Border Patrol – and now the U.S. military – is systematically destroying the environment. They’re scarring the earth and bulldozing roads to build border fences, altering water courses, cutting off wildlife from habitat and mates, creating thousands of miles of wildcat trails with vehicles while trying to apprehend migrants, and introducing glaring stadium-style lights into fragile ecosystems. The Border Patrol and the military are destroying huge swaths of pristine lands.

**DISEASE** I’ll grant you as one who worked in healthcare for years that I want the U.S. to pay attention to health concerns. The U.S. has spent enormous sums to promote public health. I want people who cross the border to be vaccinated. But if the U.S. is trying to avoid the spread of disease related to migration, it’s going about it all wrong. Detention centers and for-profit prisons are famously horrible places to be ill; in fact, they are perfect incubators for all kinds of illnesses. Border Patrol, the Bureau of Prisons, and private detention locations were horrible when it came to protecting the health of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Basic sanitation is not a hallmark of the U.S. custody systems.

**XENOPHOBIA** Fear of others is an anxiety that is perhaps the greatest impediment to immigration reform. Empathy erases it and is the moral alternative to which we should each aspire.

**POWER** I’ve said for decades as a political theorist, “Give an American power, and he or she will use it.”

**BORDER PATROL UNION/HATCH ACT** From the time of the George W. Bush administration until today, the Border Patrol Union has been growing and increasing its presence in the immigration policy debate. The Hatch Act is a policy that applies to federal employees who are covered by civil service regulations. It is designed to limit the political power of federal employees to use the color of their employment to influence public policy. I am astounded that no politicians have sought to regulate the political power of the Border Patrol union, especially when it comes to candidate endorsements. Since both Republicans and Democrats support an enforcement-only set of policies, neither has had the courage to charge Border Patrol agents with violations of the Hatch Act.

**FOR-PROFIT MIGRANT PRISONS** These are the functional equivalent of state-run prison farms, except the migrants are kept in cages and outdoor pens with minimal access to healthcare, diversion, and outside contact. A migrant’s family south of the border learns that a migrant is incarcerated in California and travels there, only to find that their loved one has been shipped to Arizona, and the family lacks the authorization to travel to Arizona for a visit. Taxpayers foot the bill for the system and legislators guarantee the service providers a daily census to keep up their profit margin.

**PROCESSING CENTERS (HIELERAS)** Around 2002, I toured the newly constructed migrant processing center at the brand-new Border Patrol Tucson Sector Headquarters, which also houses the Tucson Station of the sector. The chief there smiled as he showed me the stainless-steel room with migrants sitting on stainless steel benches with a single one-gallon plastic jug of water in the middle of the floor. He said, “We keep it really cool in there for odor control. After spending days in the desert, these folks develop quite an odor. They stink.” Having been in the over 100-degree heat of the desert, the cold of the holding tank is both cruel and oppressive. The temperatures are kept low for the convenience of the staff, not for the well-being of the migrants. The Border Patrol could save hundreds of thousands of dollars every year by just turning up the thermostat.

**CIVILIAN REVIEW** At a meet and greet of Tucson activist types and the then-new Tucson Border Patrol Sector chief, the chief clearly indicated that civilian oversight of him or his sector was not the law and not in the stars. He said, “If they ever change the law to include civilian oversight or review, I’ll resign.” I immediately, of course, said, “Hopefully we can make that happen.” Truth is, there was no oversight then, and there is none on the horizon. In fact, the Border Patrol is increasingly militarized and now engaged in nontraditional policing in a way that makes civilian review nothing but a pipe dream.

**MISSION OF BORDER PATROL** The Border Patrol was founded by Congress in 1924 and staffed by a bunch of racists charged with keeping out the Chinese. The first agents were formerly members of the Ku Klux Klan. Horse-mounted agents did encounter some Chinese. Today, the number one imperative is to look for terrorists. One CBP commissioner testified to Congress that migrants were “ground clutter” on his radar, distracting him from his primary mission of hunting terrorists. Either CBP is not particularly good at its mission imperative, or there just aren’t many suspected terrorists willing to cross the desert for days on foot when they could just arrive on an airplane instead, because domestic terrorism is dramatically rising, and it’s logical to think that resources could be best used elsewhere.

**DUSTING** This is a practice of Border Patrol helicopter pilots, who fly their choppers low to the ground, hovering over Palo Verde trees and kicking up dust. They then return after some time and see if there are new tracks in the areas that have been dusted. When we sat in the headquarters of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol in Washington, D.C., the staffers wouldn’t believe us when we described this. We asked them if they wanted to see videos. When I was doing some work on the home of a Border Patrol pilot in Tucson, he bragged about knocking a drug smuggler off a horse using the skids of the helicopter. He was fine with being judge, jury, and executioner. The man on the horse required medical treatment.

**IMMIGRATION QUOTAS** It’s complicated. Legislators can change these numbers quickly, and often and they do. The U.S. grows by about the equivalent of a large U.S. city each year by adding family members, employees, refugees, and asylees. The big problem with quotas is that they are based on countries of origin; hence, they are very unequal by many measures.

**MOVABLE BORDERS** The U.S. spends hundreds of millions of dollars in countries south of the border to pay for enforcement, purportedly to make enforcement easier here. Mexico has constitutional measures that prohibit it from accepting money from other countries. Somehow though, Mexico manages to receive enormous sums to pay for border enforcement in ways that make the lives of Central Americans miserable. The U.S. paid for an entire Border Patrol for Guatemala, down to vehicles, radios, and uniforms for their personnel. The truth is that enforcement personnel can ignore human rights and the eyes of reporters easier down south.

**DEADLY BORDERS** All around the globe, borders, walls, surveillance, and personnel make the lives of migrants miserable and indirectly (if not directly) kill thousands. The U.S. southern border counts 800 or so deaths each year. That’s the equivalent to several jet airplane crashes each year. But if you are a migrant, the deadliest terrain to cross is the geography of the European Union. The Mediterranean Sea alone claims huge numbers. Land borders are often deadly as well. Fortress America and Fortress Europe together precipitate thousands of deaths each year because of policy enforcement that lacks empathy, imagination, and human rights.

**OVERPOPULATION** This is a dangerous untruth. Every man, woman, and child on earth could be put into single-family housing with a good-sized yard into my home state of Texas. Yes, we have some places with high concentrations of folks and some places with low concentrations. But the allocation of resources is a matter for engineers and politicians, not NIMBYs (Not in My Back Yard) or BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Anyone). People screaming about overpopulation are short-sighted racists screaming into the void. We could do things better, but overpopulation and the false concept of scarcity of resources is no way to justify migrant-killing borders.

**MIGRANTS USE SCARCE RESOURCES** Yes and no. Yes, the U.S. spends enormous sums of taxpayer dollars for enforcement. No, migrants don’t use scarce resources. First, despite this common misperception, they are not eligible to receive benefits from the public treasury. Second, they are healthier, better behaved, more family-oriented, and disciplined than the average U.S. citizen. For many decades, all the studies have agreed that the presence of migrants stimulates the economy. They are significant contributors to the economy, the GDP, and every economic measure that exists.

**MONGRELS** Numerous anti-immigrant voices have for more than 100 years complained that the worst impact migration has on the U.S. is it somehow dilutes the gene pool. What they mean is the *white* gene pool. People have argued about who qualifies as being white since the time of Benjamin Franklin. The U.S. Census Bureau still tinkers with questions trying to measure the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population. Maybe the anthropologists are right, and we all migrated from Africa. Maybe the Mexicans have it right and we’re all cousins.

**HUMANITARIANS** Literally tens of thousands of people on both sides of the border – and along the migrant routes – directly provide goods and services to migrants free of charge. Food, water, clothing, housing, medical services, translation services, information and referral services, transportation, legal services … the list is very long. A lot of people do give a damn about migrants. I led a delegation of volunteers from Tucson to Mexico City, Puebla, and other locales. We visited the offices of a legislator in the Mexican national government. She started weeping because she couldn’t believe she was meeting 21 white people who, in her words “gave a damn about migrants.” Through the work of humanitarians, babies get born, lawyers file court documents, human rights advocates provide assistance, wounds get treated, welcomes are extended, teeth get brushed, and security is provided. In all cases, people with scant resources work miracles day and night on behalf of people with no resources who live in fear and trauma. Without the humanitarians, civil society, the body politic, and governments would be at an extreme loss.

**CHANGE OVER TIME** With or without additional migrants, countries change with time. From horses to cars, sabers to lasers, from writing letters to yelling into smartphones, farms to factories, change is inevitable. Sometimes the argument is made that immigrant entrepreneurs are largely responsible for changes. Other times the argument is made that migrants bring bad changes to countries. Consider, however, the case of Japan, which has notoriously maintained very little in-migration for centuries. Phenomenal change is seen there, too. There is no possible way to maintain the status quo, to keep things as they were when you were born. Everyone you know has seen change, and more is on the way. There is no room for nostalgia for the person who is alive during a time of significant migration. With migration change comes in the forms of language, food, culture, skills, knowledge, ability, religion, and so much more.

**WALL STREET REPUBLICANS** The Wall Street Journal is a Rosetta stone for understanding the Libertarian side of the Republican Party. To mix metaphors, we all live and move and have our being in a capitalist society. (Money is our most visible god). For decades, the Wall Street Journal published July 4th editorials calling for open borders. The Journal supports immigration, special visas for high-tech workers, and special visas for agricultural workers. Wall Street people are the natural allies for pro-immigration, human rights-loving folks on the left. But the left-leaning pro-immigrant crowd just won’t talk to Wall Street. I met with a bunch of union activists purportedly interested in immigration reform, migrant rights, and such. I carried on a discourse in Queens, New York, in front of a crowd with a gorgeous, older, veteran union organizer for 20 minutes or more. When I told her that her potentially biggest allies for immigration reform worked at the bottom of Manhattan on Wall Street, she wouldn’t have anything to do with it. To the degree that building coalitions with strange bedfellows is the hallmark of good public policy making, disparate people will have to talk for change to take place.

**MIGRATION VS. SLAVERY** A Marxist friend of mine said that we’re all slaves of some sort. Bob Dylan sang, “We all gotta serve someone.” If we produce more in value than we consume and the difference goes to someone else, we’re slaves to an economic system, be it capitalism, socialism, feudalism, indentured servitude, or slavery in chains, literally or de facto. My point is simply that we can continue to design and build systems that free the human spirit, and all can enjoy the benefits. Migration does not have to mean the old Bracero Program from the 1940s to the 1960s (and decades beyond under the radar). That program was chock-full of human rights violations. As a child, I took a tour of a large acreage in West Texas that was part agricultural and part ranch. The owner was a leader in my home church. He said, “That’s where Manuel sleeps. That’s where he eats. Here’s the work he does. I take him to town to send money home, get his hair cut, and tend to other things. If he messes up, he knows I’ll call the Border Patrol, and they’ll send his butt back home.” Just giving a visa to the migrant with dignity would keep that church man from wielding power over the migrant like a feudal lord. Other changes in migration law would go toward a much more mutually beneficial system.

**CHECKPOINTS** These are a very controversial feature of living relatively near the border, but apparently, they are here to stay. I recall being in high school when a guest speaker was trying to teach us some things about civics. He said the U.S. is better and different from places like the Soviet Union because we don’t have to carry papers and convince authorities that we’re citizens. We’re free to travel anywhere we please from sea to shining sea. Not so anymore. All we’re legally required to do is to stop briefly and attest to our citizenship. However, failure to do so is a ticket to secondary inspection, where Border Patrol agents who are not experienced like body-shop employees can tear your vehicle apart just because the agent who stopped you thought you were a bit too impertinent. Former U.S. Representative Gabby Giffords tried for years to delay the construction of a checkpoint north of Nogales, Arizona, near Amado. The structure there today is as permanent as Fort Knox.

**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE** When migrants enter, they agree: It’s “just us” here. People living in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Samoa, and other places under the authority of the U.S. do not enjoy the same rights as those of us who are residents in states. That’s very wrong in my judgment. It’s hundreds of times worse for people who are lawfully here on visas, like high-tech workers. And it’s a thousand times worse for migrants who have no legal claim to be on U.S. soil. Forgive me, but the words carved on the U.S. Supreme Court building, “Equal Justice Under Law,” should mean what they say. If you’re even temporarily within the jurisdiction of the U.S., then the same protections, processes, and rights should prevail. Period. Migrants are governed through administrative law, not the U.S. Code (unless prosecutors want to use the U.S. Code to enact stiffer penalties than allowed for in administrative law).

**GOP** On camera, the initials stand for “Get Out, Please.” Off camera they stand for unspeakable public policy preferences designed to disregard human rights. Don’t stop there. The same applies to the Democrats because we’re living in a time of bipartisan hatred of all things pertaining to migration. The Democrats just put more lipstick on the policies than does the GOP. The results are bills passed with bipartisan support and signed by whomever is in the White House – bills that have shrunk human rights, dignity, and respect for migrating people ever since Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Some of the worst legislation in immigration law history was written and signed by Democrats. (“Don’t hold back, Robin.” Don’t worry, I won’t.)

**HOSPITALITY** or the Law of the Wadi. “Wadi” is the plural form of the word oasis. A family is camped around a wilderness desert watering hole. A fugitive is being pursued and approaches the camp. If the fugitive asks for help, the Law of the Wadi obligates the leader of the family to grant a period of time for the fugitive’s respite and care. Also, the man pursuing the fugitive is obligated to stay away. He just circles and circles the camp. Finally, the fugitive, now recovered, chooses when and how to leave. This is the Law of the Wadi, one of the oldest laws in the world. It is the basis of hospitality, of sanctuary, of refugees, of asylees. It should govern immigration laws around the world, but we, of course, can only choose laws for ourselves here. We believe the U.S. to be an oasis, and we believe we should ground ourselves in an ethic of hospitality. It is a choice we should forever make and reaffirm often.

**SANCTUARY** Modern Sanctuary has two distinct manifestations. Religious groups often uphold the concept of providing sanctuary to migrants based on biblical concepts of hospitality. In practice, a congregation (of many denominations and/or faiths) extends to a migrant the protection and hospitality of the congregation. Basically, the person is allowed to stay in the facilities of the congregation for an extended time, and the congregation advocates for the person in public and sometimes in law. This has never been fully tested in courts in the United States. I, and tens of thousands of others, have transported migrants to congregations, advocated for them, secured legal counsel, and provided housing, food, social, religious, medical, and other services. We have also accompanied migrants to legal proceedings. The underlying assumption on behalf of the religious actors is that the migrant has a legitimate claim to be in the U.S., and that if the country were to live up to its obligations, the country would provide protection for the migrant.

**NEW SANCTUARY** The New Sanctuary Movement in the U.S. was/is like Sanctuary, but it involves a middle party: an attorney or another migrant advocate. A migrant gets adjudicated in legal proceedings. If the migrant is not immediately removed or deported, there’s time for the attorney or advocate to arrange with a religious congregation to secure food, housing, and other services inside the congregation’s facilities for what could be a very extended time. New Sanctuary is vastly different from Sanctuary because of the intermediary and because the migrant has already been adjudicated. So, Sanctuary and New Sanctuary are not equal.

**CIRCULARITY** For a hundred years or more, migrants would come to the U.S. from Mexico, work, and return home. This was particularly true for seasonal work as in agriculture. It was true for many other areas of employment. Swedes would literally migrate to Boston and New York to lay the keels of the clipper ships that were used to carry cargo around Cape Horn in Chile, South America. About twenty percent of these workers returned to Sweden.

**QUOTAS ARE INHERENTLY UNEQUAL** The word “average” can have different meanings in mathematics. It can refer to mean, median, or mode. The word equal can have at least a dozen different meanings. Here, I recommend the book “Counting.” Does it mean equal in terms of mathematics? In terms of opportunity? In terms of need? The U.S. chose in 1965 to give an equal number of visas for sending countries. In real-world terms that continue unreformed to this day, that means a small country like the Dominican Republic has the same 40,000 visas that the enormously larger country Mexico has. In what tortured logic does that mean a Mexican citizen has the same opportunity to migrate as a citizen of the Dominican Republic? The American concept of fairness was insulted then and remains insulted today.

**APPREHENSIONS VS. ENCOUNTERS** The U.S. likes to count. Border Patrol apprehensions have been counted, and statistics have been available for many decades. Today, the Border Patrol counts encounters. This complicates things for social scientists, journalists, and others. In a postmodern world, the ability to just redefine things changes the meanings the public attributes to the world the public knows.

**GUN CONTROL AND MIGRATION** Guns smuggled across the border are used by cartels. Cartels pressure families to migrate.

SOCIAL MEDIA MODELS

This chapter contains the wording of some 80 TikTok videos we produced in Mexico City to promote thinking about immigration reform. Big shoutout to Laura Garciandia, Omar Iturbe, Luis Ernesto Nava, and Keisdo Shimabakuro. I’ve included these because you may want to start making social media video clips to promote immigration reform. You may want to channel your discontent and even rage with the current administrative regime by producing your own work in a creative and constructive way. The following texts show how we tried to plant ideas in the minds of viewers.

With imagination, the United States will reform immigration policies. First, we will meet the needs of undocumented migrants already living in the U.S. Second, we will meet the needs of migrants wanting to participate in our economy. Third, we will meet the needs of migrants seeking asylum. U.S. citizens and migrants will all benefit.

With imagination, we will give undocumented migrants extended visas, making their presence in the U.S. legal. They can come out of the shadows and live here legally. Migrants can comply with their visas, get in the citizenship line, or apply for other available visas.

With imagination, we will give workers places in our economy. We will screen them in countries of origin, limit the numbers who can participate, require the posting of bonds, and for the first time in U.S. immigration policy history, give them economic incentives to comply with their work visas.

With imagination, we will quit making refugees around the world and find ways to improve our political asylum system. An imaginative politics is needed to change the asylum system. All departments of the U.S. government can contribute to a new politics.

Fixing the border is not complicated. It requires three things: Giving new visas to the undocumented living in the United States for specified time periods so they can either go home or become citizens; pre-certifying migrants in countries of origin so they can work in the U.S. economy; and honoring human rights so asylum-seekers can find relief. These are all highly motivated people, and we need them.

Many states are trying to “fix” the border with draconian laws and policies. But fixing the border is purely a federal problem. To fix the border, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, pro-immigrant people and anti-immigrant people must talk. It can be done. And it’s easier than you think.

It is unfortunate that the U.S. thinks of the immigration debate as mostly about national security, drug enforcement, labor issues, human rights, and racism. When you focus on these issues and fail to see a way forward, nothing changes. There is a simple way forward that addresses these issues. It requires immigration imagination.

Scholars have been vigorously studying immigration for decades. Much of their work has been a critique of our current policies. With immigration imagination, we can bring together the best, most direct, simplest ideas to reform immigration policies not only in the U.S., but also in the western hemisphere.

We have had problems with immigration: human rights violations in the Bracero Program and the unfair quota system, to name two. We’ve also thought of migrants as criminals, as people who take our jobs, as people who use our public money, as people who don’t pay taxes, as demons, and as people who are very un-American. We need immigration imagination so we can think more clearly.

The U.S. promises one day to reform migration policies, and the next day passes laws to punish migrants. Presidents talk out of both sides of their mouths: human rights one day, more enforcement the next. What the U.S. needs is to think with immigration imagination. There is a way forward.

Most of the time, U.S. lawmakers speak only of enforcement of border policies. Quite simply: They don’t work. More people are living in the U.S. without papers than in years past. Nearly half of them are people who came legally and overstayed their visas. U.S. Customs and Border Protection will spend $25 billion in the coming year. There is a better way. There is. It requires immigration imagination.

Border enforcement doesn’t work. It does change where migrants cross. It changes the final destinations of migrants, sometimes to graves. It disrupts patterns of migration. It makes the lives of migrants miserable and often deadly. But it simply does not work. We need immigration imagination.

Everyone has ideas and opinions about immigration. Some want to shoot migrants; others welcome them with open arms. Politicians receive donations whether they are for or against migrants. Some businesses want migrants; others want them deported. Some cities are for them, some are against. With imagination, we can find ways to adapt to and benefit from migration.

It is difficult to talk about immigration because so many people make money from it: law enforcement, attorneys, and politicians, to name a few. It has been written, “It is difficult to get someone to understand something when their salary depends on them not understanding it.” With imagination and discourse, we can change that.

Many things cause migration: U.S. military operations in Central America, the activities of multinational corporations, economies in chaos, criminal activity and corruption, lack of education and health services, climate change, lack of human rights, and more. The U.S. needs to learn to control itself instead of focusing on the border. With imagination, we can do that.

It was long thought that if the U.S. could drive up the cost of migration, fewer people would migrate. That is not true. In my lifetime, the cost of one person crossing the U.S. border has risen from $25 to $7,000, and they still come. We need to give up our old ways of thinking and start using immigration imagination.

The more it costs a migrant to cross the border, the more likely he or she is to stay in the U.S. Migrants must repay the money used to come to the U.S. If migration costs less, the migrants will have a stronger incentive to return to their country of origin when their visas expire. With imagination, we can use incentives to adapt to and control migration.

We like to talk about the transnational criminal organizations, or cartels, or what people in northern Mexico just call the mafia. The U.S. created the cartels by increasing enforcement along the border. The cartels provide services to the migrants and take their money. The more agents we have on the border, the more money the cartels make. Border enforcement indirectly transfers billions of dollars to cartels. Politicians talk of using the military to fight the cartels. With imagination, we could send many Border Patrol agents home.

Border enforcement doesn’t work. For every $100 spent by migrants to cross, the risk of apprehension decreases by 1.1 percent. So, if a migrant spends $900 more to cross, the chance of apprehension decreases by 10 percent. Most successful unauthorized border crossings by migrants now cost approximately $7,000. In the summer of 2025, some are paying as much as $13,000 just to get to the border in Mexico. They must find their way through the Mexican National Guard. Migrants stay longer to pay off their debts. We need imagination to change that.

Faith communities and community nonprofits have highly motivated volunteers, buildings, insurance, experience, meeting places, and even kitchens. They can prepare the undocumented to meet with visa-granting immigration judges much as was done during the legalization period of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. All that is needed is some immigration imagination.

In the early 2000s, the Tucson Sector had about 500 agents and related personnel. Now it has ten times more agents to apprehend about the same number of migrants every day. This is far from efficient. We need immigration imagination to change the numbers.

Some of us worry a great deal about the deaths of migrants crossing the border. Some of us do a great deal to stop the deaths: We place water barrels in the desert, post warnings, provide food and medical care, and educate migrants about what to expect on their journey. If we had immigration imagination, we could increase national security, have more flexible conditions for workers, expand human rights, muffle the political noise about the border, reduce violence in Mexico, cut the size of the cartels in the Americas, and have reasonable law enforcement.

Current border policies make it difficult and extremely expensive to enter the U.S. and make it difficult for employers to hire workers. The current policies result in huge human rights abuses, family separations, and hundreds of migrant deaths each year. Why would we support these things? We need immigration imagination.

Current border policies cause environmental destruction, higher taxpayer costs, transfer of billions of dollars to cartels, more migrant deaths, frustrated employers, and difficult decisions for families and human rights abuses. We can imagine a better border.

Immigration policies try to control an inexorable flow of humanity from the dependent south to the codependent north. Enforcement will never change this flow. Only a major but simple change in politics will change this flow. The answer lies in adapting and benefiting from this human migration. With a little imagination, we can do this.

U.S. Wall Street Republicans are the group most interested in open borders. They want a flat labor market with low, stable wages. Immigration advocates should consider them allies, not enemies. Start the conversation. Use some immigration imagination.

Why do we treat high-tech migrants and low-tech migrants so differently when it comes to immigration? It’s because our democratic, egalitarian meritocracy is rapidly becoming a caste system. Tell your neighbors and legislators that you want to see a fundamental American fairness to guide immigration reform.

Immigration is about politics. Politics is a game of naming, framing, and blaming. Everyone can name something about immigration policy that they want to reform. They can link that thing to something else. And everyone can blame someone or something so loudly that nothing gets done. Let us all promote human rights, economic growth, fairness, and families. There’s something for everyone in immigration reform.

America is not just the United States. America is 35 countries containing every race on earth and hundreds of languages, histories, and cultures. With immigration imagination, we can expand the legal-political experiment called the United States of America and extend our influence on each of those 35 countries.

The border between the United States and Mexico is approximately 1,950 miles long. It is literally impossible to make it impassable. With immigration imagination, we can make crossing the border safe, legal, and profitable for all persons wanting to change where they work, love, and live.

My Ph.D. dissertation was about religion, politics, and immigration. It breaks my heart how quiet religious institutions have become about migrants. Most faith-based work is done through specialized nonprofit organizations with separate leadership and financial resources. I plead for denominational leaders to educate and resource immigration reform and to promote and defend human rights.

I have personally found dead migrants in the desert. I helped officials remove their bodies. Dead bodies in the desert should not be part of the goals of the law-enforcement policies. Each body should be seen as a failure of policy. Nothing tells us immigration policies are more in need of reform than the hundreds of bodies that pile up each year in morgues, cemeteries, and columbaria.

For decades, Republicans have wanted law enforcement-only efforts to be the centerpiece of immigration policy. Democrats have acquiesced, saying, “We’ll try it your way, then we’ll talk.” The talks never happen. Truth is, we have an unimaginative bipartisan immigration policy focused on death, violence, and sadistic bureaucracy.

Republicans must give up their notion of enforcement-only immigration policy. Bipartisan bills have thrown billions of dollars at personnel, training, technology, walls, surveillance, and a lengthy list of other things. Those things simply do not work. Only a change in politics will give policymakers what they ultimately want: law and order.

Left to themselves, policymakers will not reform immigration. Only an educated, insistent public can create the political will for reform. Business and labor interests and religious, community, and cultural groups must reunite and have creative, imaginative conversations.

I sat with a labor organizer in Queens, New York, one day to talk about immigration reform. I told her that her biggest allies work on Wall Street over in Manhattan. “Well, we’re not going to be talking to them,” she said. I said, “Then, don’t tell me you’re interested in succeeding in immigration reform.” Everyone must come to the table if we’re to have results.

If you want to take money and power away from the cartels and criminal organizations along the border, then immigration reform is necessary. Around 2003, less than 10 percent of the migration was controlled by cartels. Today it is 100 percent. Our enforcement-only policies created the cartels. Reforming immigration will remove their bread and butter.

It is not in the short- or long-term interest of the United States to have poor neighbors. Instead, it is in the short- and long-term interest of the United States to expand markets and influence, and share our families, cultures, foods, and creativity. Sharing is good politics and in our rational self-interest.

Border humanitarian groups tell us every year that the death rates of migrants crossing the border are increasing. Presidential administrations have tried to tell us that these deaths are inevitable, can be blamed on smugglers, and that the numbers are stable over the years. The administrations simply lie. No social science supports these claims.

Human rights are not some nice luxury that distract us from more important things, as we’re often told. Supporting human rights helps us prosecute bad actors and protect both the vulnerable and the privileged among us. Immigration must include the expansion of human rights.

The deaths of migrants along the border are an intentionally chosen part of U.S. public policy. The deaths are seen as a deterrent, as proof of the need for more agents, and as evidence of the need to fight cartels. A proper analysis and properly conceived immigration reform would reduce deaths, reduce the numbers of agents, and reduce cartel activity. What is there to be afraid of by reforming policy?

I’ve talked with thousands of migrants for more than three decades. They tell me they want family life and work. The U.S. wants that, too. And the U.S. really does want and need workers. “So,” they ask me, “why does the U.S. make it so hard to come here and work?” That should be a haunting question for policymakers.

Governors who bus migrants to other states are not punishing migrants or deterring migration. It’s ironic: These governors are often transferring migrants to more favorable immigration jurisdictions and delivering migrants closer to their original destinations free of charge.

If the U.S. reformed immigration policies, it would enjoy increased national security. Authorities would know who is here, where they are, and what they are doing. Migrants could present identification to law enforcement when needed.

If the U.S. reformed immigration policies, employers and employees would have flexibility and stability. The Labor Department could keep the available labor pool at sustainable levels and business cycles more stable. Any effort toward reform must seriously consider economic incentives for all.

Proper immigration reform would shift the costs of much enforcement from U.S. taxpayers to the migrants themselves. The migrants would not pay anything if they complied with their visas. The cost of issuing visas is a drop in the bucket compared with increased GDP and future tax revenues at federal, state, and municipal levels.

Reform immigration policy, and pre-certified migrants would not use the services of cartels. Reform would remove billions of dollars from the hands of the cartels. U.S. enforcement-only policies created the market for smugglers. The U.S. can defund the cartels by reforming immigration policies.

If we reform immigration policy, pre-certified migrants could come to the U.S., buy pizzas, drink beer, go to church, start businesses, own homes, and travel to see family members here and abroad. They’d spend what they make here, and when they go home, spend their money at many U.S.-owned businesses.

Over time, if we reform immigration policies, migrants returning home will be transferring billions of dollars into their local economies instead of giving their money to the cartels. They will do more to integrate our economies than can be accomplished by international trade agreements.

Giving visas to the undocumented and certifying newly arriving workers would give U.S. employers a stable and predictable workforce solution. The U.S. enjoys record low unemployment. Many think this is the best time to reach out to neighbors to secure more workers to fill necessary jobs.

When we give the undocumented visas and certify more workers to be in the U.S., fewer personnel will be needed to fill the ranks of ICE and the Border Patrol. A properly conceived immigration reform will drastically reduce the current costs of immigration enforcement.

Without question, there is a role for border and interior enforcement. With immigration reform, however, more officers and agents will be available for border security operations, checking cargo, and enforcing trade agreements. Most illegal drugs enter the U.S. through ports of entry.

For the first time in U.S. immigration policy history, I want to see an economic incentive to urge migrants to comply with the terms of their visas. Migrants would post a bond before they come to the U.S. They would transfer their earnings, maybe $10,000 to $20,000, home, and leave. If not, they would forfeit the money to law enforcement and become a federal fugitive.

The path forward to immigration reform is to change just a few variables to achieve the maximum benefit with the least expense: Give visas to the undocumented people here based on their needs. Create economic incentives to comply with the terms of their visas for those who wish to work here.

The U.S. Labor Department could certify migrants as workers before they come to the U.S. and set quotas for the number of workers in various sectors of the U.S. economy. Migrants would comply with a government program rather than risk their lives with the cartels.

Many people ask why the U.S. can’t recreate the Bracero Program. The answer is that the Bracero Program abused human rights, mostly because the employers held the visas, and there were only a few labor inspectors. A properly reformed policy would give the visa to the migrant, who could just go down the street and get another job if he or she had problems with an employer. The migrant also could report the abusive employer.

When migrants come to interviews for visas, we could require them to obtain licenses to drive, buy car insurance and health insurance, get the proper vaccinations, and learn basic language proficiency. With some imagination, we can create a new social contract with migrants.

According to U.S. law, migrants who participate in visa programs can begin the naturalization process at any time: before, during, and after the term of their visas to work in the United States. This is yet another incentive for migrants to comply with their visas.

When the United States changed immigration policy from a race-based system to a country-of-origin system, things functionally remained the same. The predominant color of citizens in a country did not change. Some words in our laws changed, but our so-called system remained race based. The newer policies functionally maintained preferences for people with lighter skin.

Our race-based system favors northern Europe and always has. We decided to give each country the same number of visas. However, children, parents, and other relatives of people living here went to the front of the line. With imagination, we can make the U.S. look more like the rest of the world and make each of us safer.

The U.S. gives the same number of visas to every country. No one can convince me that 40,000 visas for a small Caribbean Island nation is the same as giving 40,000 visas to a large country like Mexico. The same number of visas for each country sounds equal, but it is anything but proportional. There’s just no fairness about it.

The United States deports U.S.-born children every day. That means the U.S. is deporting U.S. citizens every day. U.S. citizenship is based on a person’s place of birth. In recent years, the U.S. has created more than 150,000 refugees in Mexico. Every day, the U.S. is giving its children to another country. We need immigration imagination.

The U.S. knows how to interview migrants and issue documents. We’ve done it millions of times. That’s better than incarcerating families and children for years on end. In the early 1990s, we legalized millions of people. Community groups helped, and legalized migrants have fared very well in the U.S. society and economy.

Social scientists have studied migration intensively. They can advise the U.S. government with lots of creative ways to adapt the migration phenomenon to the mutual benefit of migrants and citizens. Immigration imagination means at least listening to the social scientists who help us envision a reformed and better immigration policy.

Migrants in the United States have billions of dollars in banks and are eager to buy houses, travel, and start businesses. With immigration reform, hundreds of thousands of homes would be built, and airlines would sell round-trip tickets for families wanting to visit. Wages will go up for everyone when migrants are living in the open.

For too long, migrants have been thought of as a major security threat to the U.S. Crime databases tell us that migrants commit fewer crimes per capita than U.S. citizens. There is no reason whatsoever to base our immigration problems on fear and poor reporting.

Migrants living in the U.S. are healthier on average than U.S. citizens. They use fewer health-care resources during their working years. Most health-care dollars are spent during end-of-life crises. Migrants have usually left the United States prior to those times. It is simply unjustifiable to use healthcare as a reason not to reform immigration policies.

When refugees and asylum-seeking individuals are paroled into the United States, they have an extremely high rate of compliance with their appointments with immigration officials. Most missed appointments are due to miscommunication about when and where to meet. People seeking protection take it seriously.

Overall, the United States makes a huge amount of money from migrants. The costs to the United States come from expensive enforcement and border counties’ provisions of healthcare, education, services, and more. With immigration imagination, costs and benefits can be more evenly distributed.

The difference between refugees and asylum-seekers is geography. Refugees obtain protection outside the U.S. Asylum-seekers obtain protection at the border or in immigration offices inside the U.S. We need to make it easier for all to obtain protection where they are, even before they arrive.

I watched a very young girl kneel and pray at a shrine in Mexico just before she picked up two gallons of water and walked off into the desert as she crossed the border. As a former pastor, I have rarely seen such faith. One night in a shelter in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, I set the collarbone of a migrant who had been attacked by a U.S. Border Patrol agent while he was sleeping in the desert in the U.S. These types of injuries are rampant and without excuse.

In the borderlands of Arizona, I have met physicians, attorneys, engineers, chefs, and many other professionals seeking relief and opportunity in the U.S. With imagination, we can figure out how to provide opportunities for these people to come to the U.S. legally and make contributions here.

In the U.S., enforcement resources are focused on people who cross borders while nearly half of all people living in the U.S. illegally came here legally: They overstayed their visas. That statistic alone begs us to understand that this is not just about the border –it's about a broken system in need of reform.

I have worked with migrants for four decades as an activist, a pastor, a nonprofit organization executive, and an academic. I’ve spent many days and nights in shelters and in meetings with government and law enforcement. I have stories, lectures, sermons, books, photos, and presentations. I will come to you to share and help you think more clearly and act decisively for immigration reform.

If you want to have immigration reform, hold up your arm, point to those things that are wrong, ask who wants to do something about it, then tell them to meet you at 2 p.m. Thursday. Have something for them to do. It matters. People need your leadership. All you need is imagination.

Social workers and other helping professionals in your area know where the migrants are. Just ask. They may even be able to introduce you. Have no agenda. Meet them. Honor their stories. Build trust. Ask them what they need. If it is too much for you to give, go to your elected officials and teach them why it is in their interest to help.

When you travel, what do you take? Toothbrush, nail clippers, a comb – a lot of simple things. Migrants need that stuff, too. Oh, and shoestrings. Border Patrol agents routinely steal shoestrings so migrants can’t run away. Get these things together. Buy in bulk. Ship them to shelters. I’ll help you.

Jesus directed us to those who are hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, sick, unwelcome, and in prison. That’s the résumé of many migrants who are crossing the border. Be compassionate. When you help migrants, you’re ministering to Jesus.

VOLUNTEERING

Migrants do matter. With imagination and implementation, we can incorporate the gifts of migrants into our social, economic, and political world here and in the western hemisphere. We can extend dignity, rights, and the hope that comes from opportunity. We can learn from migrants and our neighboring countries. We can get to a mutually beneficial place.

The history of the United States is a struggle between those who want to own and control the United States and those who want to expand rights and liberty. Many struggles have resulted in change: Women voting, civil rights, gay rights, and on and on, thankfully. Protesting, resisting, transforming … all the different strategies for social change have had some success. Some say only violence creates change. Empathy, though, is a powerful motivation for change. Nonetheless, serious actions that generate awareness and empathy can also pressure leaders and influencers alike to affect change.

It is time for a new level of activism, or as a friend of mine says, actionism. It is time for a major response to what the Trump/Miller/Homan/Noem group is doing to immigration, or more accurately, migration. Long after these four people are gone, others will take their place. For generations, the war against migrants has been bipartisan and entrenched in the American psyche. When action is sufficient and sustained in a human rights struggle, the American psyche will heal.

As recent popes and many other religious leaders have correctly said, migration is a human right. The United States needs to come to that conclusion and adapt to the migration in ways that are mutually beneficial to the U.S. and the rest of the world, but particularly to our neighbors to the south in this hemisphere. Doing that will require major reforms to U.S. immigration policies. This book is a framework for migration reform. In the meantime, there are many things local actionists here and in other countries can do, starting with focusing attention on the plight of migrants in this hemisphere.

The migration story is always in the news, but it is a story of enforcement-only policies, government-manufactured news, and local rehashes of government press releases. Here I’ve only scratched the surface of things that could be done, but now is the time for a new group of activists and/or actionists to step up to the plate and launch new efforts to resist and transform public policies. It’s time for more community organizing, a renewed human rights movement, a time to say clearly that migrants do matter.

The Black Panthers taught a long time ago that it takes informed people to influence public policy. They read newspapers for two hours a day. We live in a new media world. To stay informed, you can create Google Alerts. (It’s easy. Go to Google Alerts and set up notifications for key words like immigration, migration, migrants, sanctuary cities, ICE, Border Patrol, and so on. If you want to narrow it down, add a key word like your state or your city, or both.) Find out what is happening where you live. Something related to immigration is happening everywhere in the United States and in neighboring countries every day. Research the organizations that serve migrants where you live. Volunteer. They all need your help. Start your own group.

Scholars, think tanks, filmmakers, journalists with podcasts and Substacks, poets, artists, and others are writing, posting, and teaching about immigration issues every minute of the day. I follow Austin Kocher, who was recently syndicated because he has some of the best statistics. I follow CLINIC (Catholic Legal Immigration Network) because it offers a comprehensive look at things happening across the country. Take some time and learn the biases and orientations of the organizations. For instance, the Migration Policy Institute is more about academic study and less about changing policy. The Center for Immigration Studies is bogus in my opinion, but it is often quoted in media for what journalists call “balance.” The Pew Research Center is fabulous. The Cato Institute leans heavy toward Libertarian public policy preferences, but one can rarely fault their data. Your Google searches and alerts will identify others for you to follow that perhaps more closely align with your interests. The point is, though, get up to speed with what is happening so you can join the conversation.

I’ve imagined enterprising activists installing cameras in Mexico looking north into the U.S. ports of entry to film migrants being returned into Mexico. Scenes of the deportations should be on the news every day. Migrants are removed or deported to Mexico nearly 24/7 despite international agreements that they would be walked across the border only during certain hours. I’ve personally photographed Border Patrol agents returning women in the darkness of night. I’ve witnessed women and sometimes children released into cities where they have no familiarity or knowledge of resources available to protect them. The return of kids is subject to precise protocols, but those protocols are not always observed. Posting live videos and notifying local media and volunteer organizations could help.

A quick Internet search will tell you where the consulates of Canada, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and other countries are located inside the United States. Find out how you can help them protect their citizens in your area. Most consulates have an office of protection services. You might become their liaison in an outlying community. Volunteer. The consulates help their nationals navigate the legal system, the schools, the healthcare systems, information and referral, temporary housing, and more. It might take a while, but when they learn of your passion and sincerity, they will welcome you. You might even end up opening your home for people in need or accompanying or witnessing at the immigration courts.

Migrant deaths and migrant safety have been a focus of my work and the work of many so-called humanitarian organizations. My focus in this area goes back some 40 years now. You can contact your medical examiner, forensic science center, and/or local law enforcement officials. They need all kinds of help: clerical, body identification, family notification, search and rescue. The Office of the Medical Examiner and the Forensic Science Services in Tucson are the gold standard for identifying deceased migrants, and the care they provide for the families of missing and deceased persons is stellar. The offices in New Mexico are very professional, and some in South Texas are developing and helping tremendously. Volunteers can increase their capacity to do great work. I recall when my friend Richard Elias, then a member of the Pima County, Arizona, Board of Supervisors, got up from his family’s Thanksgiving dinner to open the Forensic Science Center in Tucson to deliver the remains of a deceased migrant to a family that had traveled from far south of the border. Imagine facilitating that kind of closure.

The migration of tens and hundreds of thousands of people – men, women, and children – across the border results in a lot of trash and debris in the lands they cross. The lands may be in federal, tribal, state, county, city, or private jurisdictions. Find out where the migrant traffic is and organize trash pick-ups. These are environmentally good things to do. They help with livestock production and wildlife. They address a chief complaint of land managers who want to preserve wilderness, protect nature, and more. Your mere presence in remote areas of the border may be the occasion for the rescue of a migrant, a migrant family, or a group. Yes, they may be apprehended eventually – though that is not your job – but at least they will live to walk another day. Remember, you’re the firefighters in the desert, not the police. No one should just evaporate in the desert because a few people in Washington, D.C., have no vision.

Various individuals and groups have developed and promoted telephone apps for migrants to use during their migration across Mexico and into the United States. Find out about them. Numerous apps have been developed for urban use to notify migrants of U.S. federal agents conducting raids in the area. Find out about them, too. Many websites direct migrants to resources in the United States to assist in seeking asylum, find out about adjustments to their status, and provide information to those who are preparing to migrate. My colleague and I operate the website guiamigrantes.com to inform migrants of the dangers ahead and provide information about how to seek help and otherwise prepare for their journeys. Find out about these sites and promote them in your various communities. Nearly every congregation I have visited has migrants in their membership who know people preparing to make the journey.

The most promising development in migrant safety is the satellite-to-phone technology that allows smartphones to send texts from remote areas. Elon Musk’s Starlink has partnered with T-Mobile to launch the services, with a beta test that began in the summer of 2025. People with compatible smartphones and T-Mobile service, along with AT&T users who opt in, can now send texts from isolated borderlands to seek help, potentially saving lives. More than half of the Border Patrol rescues in the southwest are self-initiated by migrants using cellphones. However, there are very few cellphone towers in the area. Most migrants do have phones. If they were informed and enabled, at least one person in each group of migrants could be equipped with the technology to initiate rescues and thereby reduce the obscene number of migrant deaths each year.

In some areas of the border groups have formed and are active in searching for missing migrants and/or their remains. This is a wonderful, often challenging, and frequently arduous ask that helps migrants and their families. If you do go on a search, never disturb human remains or the site. Always contact local law enforcement first. The death of a migrant in the United States is always first investigated as a possible crime to rule out the possibility of foul play.

Most counties along the southwest border have search and rescue groups. Sometimes the groups are part of law enforcement, while others are volunteers who work with law enforcement. Most participate in the international 406 search and rescue program, a beacon system that uses satellites to detect and locate distress signals. Most of

these groups welcome help. Even if you are not physically fit for strenuous search and rescue activities, you can learn to operate a radio, keep an eye on the searchers’ vehicles, provide coffee and food, or rendezvous with them at the end of their search.

Don’t just become a donor to a group that helps migrants, become a fundraiser. Organize donors. It’s true that most organizations have some benefactors who provide large gifts, but the lifeblood of most humanitarian organizations is a Mississippi River of $5 bills. Invite me. I’ll give a talk, screen a film. We’ll pass the hat and fund the organization of your choice. But you can do this without me. Search for pro-migrant documentaries, have friends over, raise money to send to those who are doing heroic service with few resources.

For four decades I’ve worked with individuals and groups all over the United States to provide resources for the shelters that are scattered all along the northern border of Mexico, even all the way to the border of Mexico and Guatemala. They not only help the migrants that are about to cross the border, but those who are returned by U.S. authorities. They need food, clothes, blankets, pillows, first aid, over-the-counter medicine, soap, shampoo – you name it. There is a Costco in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. Take the director of a shelter shopping and let the director get what is needed. It is true that the census in the shelters is down because of recent developments in both Mexican and U.S. law enforcement efforts. They’re currently stacking up in some parts of Mexico. But the migrants will return to the northern border. The migration is an inexorable migration of the dependent poor in the south to the co-dependent people in the north.

Take a group to visit a shelter. Partner with them. Wash bedding, paint rooms and equipment, plant some trees, clean play areas, and resupply the shelter with consumables. Share art. Help with the kids. For decades I required youth groups to raise $700 to pay for their trip and another $700 to help the organization we were going to serve. Trips are not for punching your do-gooder ticket. Talk to the directors of the shelters and bring a stack of prepaid credit cards so they can get the things they need to serve the migrants.

Contact for-profit businesses where you live. Hotels and motels regularly replace bedding and linens. They’re perfect to assist the migrant shelter operators. It may be logistically challenging and fun to get them across the border, but it can be done. The shelters also need toys, paper, pencils, and art supplies for the kids. Go to the shelter and take them shopping.

Create displays to educate yourself and your people. Sometimes you don’t know what you think, believe, or feel until you produce it in words, graphics, or art. So, what if you are in Little Rock, Arkansas, or Cincinnati, Ohio? You can help there, too. Create posters or museum-quality displays to educate and inform your group, congregation, or club about the conditions of migrants and the presence of humanitarian groups along the border. Rip photos and news stories from the web and get it done.

Migrant kids attend school in your school district. Contact the district or start with a teacher you know. Migrants are everywhere, and migrant children are among the universally deserving. Can you tutor? Maybe you can organize a group of tutors. Can you hang out with vulnerable kids before or after school? Can you walk them from the drop-off point to the front door? Find out what the kids need and volunteer to help meet that need.

The Feds are coming after sanctuary cities. Thank your sanctuary city leaders for doing the right thing. Respond by being a safe place in your person, your home, your congregation, your neighborhood. Learn Spanish. Learn about the Sanctuary Movement, New Sanctuary, cities as sanctuaries. Talk to friends and family. Be a safe place; make a safe place. Help families prepare for emergencies that result from enforcement, fear, and harassment. Have the kids write emergency phone numbers somewhere on their body in case they’re separated from their parents. It’s getting that crazy.

Create a new organization from scratch. I’ve incorporated at least ten myself. Three of the nonprofit organizations started with nothing, and decades later all three of them are providing more than a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of goods and services. A 501(c)(4) nonprofit corporation is one that can legally engage in political activity and provide liability protection. You hear about 501(c)(3) organizations all the time. They’re charities, churches, museums, and nature preserves. The so-called C4s are like them except for two particular details. First, contributions are not tax-deductible. Second, they can endorse candidates, direct funds to educational programs around issues, etc.

It really is simple to create nonprofit organizations. It only takes a few hours to do the paperwork. You create a nonprofit corporation in your state by simply filling out the forms and signing them. You then seek recognition by the Internal Revenue Service by filling out their forms. Done. Oh, you may want to avoid the current DEI words, and you must be clear that what you are doing doesn’t compete with a for-profit organization. Then you wait. Technically, once the forms are filled out, you can proceed immediately to act “as if” everything were in order. It’s best, though, to wait until you get what is called the recognition letter. Some groups of activists prefer to function as individuals. In this climate, I strongly recommend the corporate form to limit liabilities as much as possible.

Observe and report. ICE AIR, ICE, and Border Patrol are constantly in motion. Now, other local law enforcement entities are joining in the federal activities in greater numbers than ever. Film and post. The public has a right to know what is going on. There is no rational expectation of privacy on the part of the Border Patrol (or even migrants, for that matter). The public has a right to see the activities of law enforcement in the United States. Show people what is happening. You have a phone. Use it! Learn how to put photos and videos in the cloud.

Volunteer to help researchers. University faculties, colleges of public health, and others are doing research. When migrants are applying for political asylum, immigration lawyers must show evidence to judges about the conditions in the country where migrants would be returned. If you have Internet service, you can be a pro-migrant nomad volunteer. Websites, news sites, and social media products exist nearly everywhere. Several Jewish, Catholic, nondenominational, and community organizations across the U.S. build files that are used by immigration judges to grant relief to people seeking asylum who fear being returned to their country of origin. Imagine helping one person avoid a certain death. I’ve been present when an asylum case was lost and relatives received a letter a week or two later reporting the death of a returned asylum applicant. I’ve even seen the news clipping attached to the letter. I always felt I could have done more.

Start an endowment to help one organization or another. Again, create a 501(c)(3). Get people to add a codicil to their will donating even a small percentage or a specific amount to your organization. Immigration problems are not going away. Sure, it might take 25 years to raise a million dollars, but it also might just take a year or two. Then you could give grants to organizations that are on the frontlines. Imagine the joy of writing those checks and maybe even going to visit where the work is being done.

Contact your local social workers. Every community in the U.S. has social workers. They know where the migrants live, where they work. They know what they need. Meet those needs in Nebraska, Kentucky, Idaho –wherever you live. Start a free migrant family babysitting service. Find out who needs help, then be that help. Organize grandmas and grandpas who are tired of playing games in their retirement centers. Talk to parents. Hang out in the park with them and their kids. Go for hikes. Watch TV. You won’t be bored.

I won’t name names or organizations, but I’ve been doing this for a while. My father dramatically assisted in the repatriation of the Philippines during WWII. This is in my blood. I was a pastor with a background in social ethics for a third of a century. I hold a Ph.D. in political science. I have documentaries and films I’m authorized to screen for groups. In short, I have lectures. Will travel. I’m willing to help stir the interest where you live and organize to help. You can find me at RobinHoover.com.

— Persist and Resist. Much love!

CONCLUSION

If we have empathy for the people who are migrating (and even empathy for the people trying to control migration), and if we have knowledge of the facts on the ground including the deficiencies, inefficiencies, ineffectiveness, and inequities of our policies, we might come up with something that can be more acceptable to everyone involved.

Human rights should be the basis for evaluating our vision for immigration reform. The so-called Golden Rule that exists in various forms in the great religious and moral paradigms of the world all assume self-love and urge people to love others, neighbors, and even strangers. My, how we do love ourselves! But a vision for transforming immigration policies requires a love for others.

Rational people can argue about how to do that, but it should never involve militarizing borders, kidnapping people in the streets of the U.S., sending captured people to arbitrary countries far from the U.S., separating families, or herding migrants down death trails in deserts.

There is absolutely no reason the U.S. people and its government can’t love Mexicans, Canadians, and Central Americans like we love ourselves. Their cultures, their languages, their cultures dominated much of the U.S. long before the U.S. was founded and began a westward hegemonic expansion.

All human beings need love, dignity, respect, identity, and rights of all kinds. Humans matter. In general, many agree with these concepts. Yet, others complain. We’re witnessing those complaints playing out in fascist immigration enforcement policies and practices here in the summer of 2025.

Love comes in many forms. A jug of water and a can of beans in the desert is all it takes to save a life. A job means life for workers and, often, life for families. It has been my mission to provide humanitarian assistance for migrating people for four decades. It has also been my mission to advocate for changes in policies that imperil migrants. One is imperiled without work and with so-called authorities breathing down your neck.

Love is a verb. That’s not a cliché. When we choose policies that address the concrete human needs of the migrants risking their lives and contributing to the gross domestic product of the United States, we’re extending love to them, and to ourselves.

Often, we compare immigration policies of the U.S. to immigration policies of other countries. Is that our calling? What if we chose good immigration policies that suited our needs and the needs of our neighboring countries as a model for other countries to follow instead? The U.S. is faced with the moral task of choosing migration policies that enhance our vision of the future we want.

It remains to be seen whether a true social movement leader or a resistance movement will emerge in the United States that will help the western hemisphere discern a vision. I perceive that a groundswell of people committed to changing immigration policies and willing to resist current policies is the only answer. Leaders have failed us. They reflect and refract only what they hear from constituents. In that sense, they are not leaders but followers.

Now is not the time for politics as usual. The political will for changing immigration policies will have to come from the people, people who are led by those who resist the kinds of law enforcement that is being expanded meteorically.

Conventional, cookbook politics played out in thousands of communities in the U.S. and in communities in this part of the world will contribute to change. Even old folks sitting in their homes posting on the Internet will help. However, I fear that the only serious changes in law enforcement will come, as it always has, from individuals, groups, and communities opposing and resisting draconian, fascistic enforcement that has no respect for courts, institutions, churches, hospitals, playgrounds, retirement villages, or dozens of other formerly “safe” places.

Now is the time for Wall Street Republicans and Red State Main Street Republicans to speak up and demand changes in immigration policies that enhance the economy. Now is the time for all kinds of Democrats to speak up and demand changes. Boycotts, divestments, election recalls … all kinds of initiatives can be undertaken before the close of business today.

As to the more mundane level of politics, it helps. It is not sufficient, but it helps. Begin with natural players. Social workers, pastors, the police, businesses, activists, and community groups need to know your concerns, your activities, how you spend your money, and how you will cast your votes.

The people with authority and influence where you live need to discern agendas, speak with leaders at higher jurisdictions, and share messages to the public. Unfortunately, just writing a letter to a member of Congress is not very effective. Letter and email writing is really most helpful only when a vote is pending before the legislatures of the states and of Congress. And, unfortunately, as I have written, the current policies are an artifact of both political parties. Most members of Congress wait for interested parties, unions, groups, associations, and local governments to put together solid plans to move forward with public laws and policies.

Since the border is more than just an imaginary line in the dirt or the river, there are many places where one can intersect and interact with “the border.” The border exists all the way up into Montana, where ranchers hire foreign sheepherders to care for flocks. It exists in Silicon Valley, where technological folks envision new things for us to consume.

Of course, there is a lot of work along the river and the imaginary line. Of course, the humanitarian groups need to be supported. Of course, the many NGOs that provide legal services, social services, shelters, and more need to be supported. There are many places to volunteer, and many issues that are related to migration.

One can get down into the weeds, so to speak, with the issues surrounding the increasing militarization of the border, protecting the rights of the public against unwarranted surveillance, working with local law enforcement to build community trust. Hospitals are required to provide indigent care to migrants. Many of these people need a place to recuperate after hospital treatments. One can contact the local consulates and inquire about their needs. You don’t have to go to the border per se to be helpful. At least a hundred asylum organizations have centers where research is done on the conditions in countries of origin. Just using your own laptop, you can provide research that will bolster the claims of asylum applicants when they appear in immigration courts.

Then, there are all the little things you can do while on your break. Re-post news pieces you find on your social media. Re-post politically expressive art to your social media. Sometimes art or viral photographs change public policy. (Pictures of enforcement officers separating children from parents along the Rio Grande River come to mind.)

Writing skills are needed. Nearly every community in the United States is served by newspapers. If not, regional papers are read in those local communities. Write logical, short, concise, to-the-point letters to the editor. Send a letter to the editor to your friend who lives far away so that it can be published there as well. Writing guest opinions that will be published is a skill. If you can’t do it, prompt your pastor, city council person, or a judge to write for you. They’ll be glad you thought of them and that you honor their opinions.

Perhaps it is like stepping into a minefield, but radio, TV, podcasts, and community panels are important forums for the public discourse on immigration. Prepare your story. Practice. Come up with catchy phrases and sentences that will be good for publication and broadcast. If not, find someone you know and encourage them to be a spokesperson advocate.

Ideology may not be the most helpful thing in the effort to bring about reform. Ideology is fine unless it cuts off a large swath of your audience. I was once with former U.S. Sen. Al Franken in an impromptu studio on a live radio program speaking about migrant workers coming to participate in the U.S. economy. I could see the hair standing up on his neck. He began responding immediately with the positions of labor unions that want to protect their workers from perceived unfair competition. This was a case when someone we might consider woke would go only so far. He wanted to portray a centrist Democratic vision of a polite border. What he wasn’t ready to do was speak about a just border.

Find your voice, evaluate your motives, check your quantum of empathy, figure out how best to move your interests forward.

The Declaration of Independence lists life ahead of liberty. Government has a fundamental responsibility to preserve life. In those crazy days of 2001, as we were floundering to save migrant lives in the deserts of Southern Arizona, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service called a meeting in Ajo, Arizona, at the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and had 22 different stakeholders show up. They included the Air Force Bombing Range, the Bureau of Land Management, Pima County government, the Tohono O’odham Nation, and a lot more.

Everyone sat around and talked about their perspectives, their missions, their jobs. Everyone in the room talked about migrants as “them” – that is, a group of people with whom they had no ties.

At the end of the meeting, the chief ranger of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument stood up. He was very clear, as we all should be: “We each have responsibilities in our various jurisdictions, but I hope we can all agree that our number one priority is to save lives.” I couldn’t agree more then, and I can’t agree more today. If we can reform migration policies, enhance human rights in our policies, integrate our economies, and discern a hundred-year plan for enhancing the lives and the economies of the countries in the western hemisphere, we will have accomplished something.