

The Legalization Tsunami and the Progressive Tide: Preparing To Be Lifted—*Not Drowned*

by Larry Kleinman

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Soon, possibly *very soon*, it may all come down to three words: **you can stay**. In Spanish, just *two* words: ***puedes quedar***.

President Obama will probably not utter those words as he signs a comprehensive immigration bill which includes a path to citizenship for some eleven million immigrants. The struggle to get to place those words at the heart of our immigration policy will have consumed years of our lives, witnessed countless and even unspeakable tragedies, called forth billions of words, cost a few hundred millions of dollars, and combusted enough fossil fuels to accelerate climate change. (Note to selves: need to work on that next.)

Regardless of the wording, the message and the feeling on that joyous, though surely bittersweet day will be equally simple: ***you belong***.

It's pretty hard to overestimate the impacts that opening a path to citizenship will have on individual families, on communities, on our society and body politic, and on our organizations. I've tried—to overestimate it—but everywhere I cast my imagination, I see transformational potential: liberation from ever-present fear, bursts of proactivity and embrace of the “long view”, affirmation of civic and economic contributions, release from de-facto “confinement” in the U.S....and that's just a sampling from the *immigrant-level* vantage point.

That's ample reason to make time to *plan for implementation* even as we throw ourselves headlong into *enacting* a mass-scale legalization program. But, as they say on late-night TV commercials, *there's more*. Visualize the opportunities for community-based organizations—but especially those dedicated to social change—to immensely expand our community capital and our capacities as we guide hundreds, or thousands—for some organizations, tens of thousands—through a process that immigrants will vividly remember as long as they live.

The organizations that serve and lead millions of new Americans will have the power to bend Dr. King's “arc” more fully and promptly toward justice.

The tide of millions that can so dramatically lift us all, could just as well drown us, or simply wash over us and leave us in disarray, even as we tell ourselves we've done “a heck of a job.”

We won't be “ready” for the *tsunami*. We won't be ready to provide the exact value sought by all who come to us. We won't be ready to provide it when they want it. We *can* be, however, become substantially “readier” than we are today. We *can* make it our business to anticipate our limitations. We *can* develop simple but effective responses that offer to all who come to us *something of value*, even if it's not precisely what they expected. Being “readier” will likely make the difference between “drowning” and being lifted. It will put *us* on the path to movement citizenship: the collective power to institute enduring social change far beyond immigration reform.

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