Maya Angelou wrote, “The needs of society determine its ethics.” Are the nation’s ethics about immigration changing? Do a society’s ethics really evolve in response to its needs?

The answer is yes. Ethics change over time, and they do indeed evolve to reflect changing the changing needs of society. Consider these three examples:

- Slavery was common in many societies until the beginning of the industrial revolution. After decades of economic and moral debate, a shift—at least in Western society—occurred, and slavery was slowly eliminated from the mainstream economic equation. The “personhood” of those who were formerly enslaved gained recognition, enslavement of fellow human beings was no longer morally acceptable. The struggle is not over, but there is now no doubt slavery is ethically indefensible.

- Birth control of any type was discouraged in the United States until the twentieth century. The work of activists such as Margaret Sanger opened the door for families to manage their resources and reproduction, reproductive technology improved, and condoms moved from the back shelf of the pharmacy to the checkout counter of the minimart.
In 1820 in women in the United States not only were unable to vote, they also could not inherit property. After a century of hard work and tireless activism, state laws and our Constitution changed in response to the growing belief that women didn't need to be focused solely on reproduction and child-rearing in order to ensure the stability of the nation.

Will there be an ethical shift around the issue of immigration? This is already happening, and in the next blog post I will discuss the roots of this change. Hint: In the developed world obesity is a bigger health risk than hunger!