Episode 512: Are the Tolerant Millennials the Least Tolerant of All? New Research Asks Some Tough Questions

Guest: April Kelly-Woessner

WOODS: I just read your book chapter in this book that'll be coming out — I'll ask you to tell us about that in a minute — that'll be coming out in the not-too-distant future. At the show notes page today, TomWoods.com/512 for Episode 512, we'll link to a couple of blog posts of yours summarizing the findings of this chapter so people can get situated, get a sense of what it is you're talking about. I want to have you explain, before we get into what your ultimate thesis is, first of all what we mean by the idea of political tolerance, because I think people think it just means that you're willing to listen to other points of view — which, it does mean that — but we wouldn't necessarily say that somebody is tolerant just because he's willing to listen to groups he's already favorable to.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Right.

WOODS: It goes well beyond that. So tell us what you mean by this.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Right. It's a great question, Tom, and it's a great question, because in the popular press, recently I've seen a lot of confusion over the term. There was an article in *The Economist* maybe three weeks ago declaring that young people are more tolerant than ever, and this is what I call the myth of youthful tolerance, the idea that young people are the most tolerant among us. And people who make that claim are usually defining tolerance in terms of acceptance of alternative lifestyles. So they look at young people today, and they see that they're more accepting of homosexuality and gay marriage than previous generations. They might be more accepting of minority groups. They might be more accepting of things like atheism. And so they look at these measures, and they say young people are more tolerant than previous generations, because they're more accepting of alternative lifestyles and groups that were historically not accepted into the mainstream.

WOODS: And I myself might have been inclined to accept that definition, but then when I looked at what you wrote, of course I suddenly realized the real truth of the matter, which is not that we've seen an increase in tolerance at all, because the real issue is how do young people deal with people who disagree with them on all those issues. That's the question.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Exactly right, and that is what social scientists mean when they talk about political tolerance. And so political tolerance from a social science definition has been studied for 60 years, and it started with looking at people's intolerance towards communists during the McCarthy era. And what we mean by political tolerance is whether or not you're willing to extend basic democratic rights — the right to speak, the right to teach college is a common measure, the right to have your book put in a public library — so whether or not you're willing to extend those basic democratic freedoms to the people you most fundamentally dislike. So it's really a measure of how you treat your political enemies.

So when we look at young people today, the question isn't whether or not they like homosexuals and minority groups more. That's wonderful, but that's not a measure of tolerance, because it's not very tolerant to let your friends speak and have political power. When we talk about tolerance, we mean what rights and guarantees are you willing to give to your political enemies, and that's where we find that young people tend to be lower now than previous generations.

WOODS: There's one example in your chapter that really surprised me as an example of this, and that has to do with the attitude among young people toward Islam. Because on the one hand, they appear to be in *The Economist* magazine sense, more tolerant of Islam than their parents and grandparents are. But on the other hand, when you ask about what would you think we ought to do about a Muslim cleric who is denouncing America, they have no tolerance at all.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Right, right. And I know that's surprising to a lot of people, because what they expect is that liberals would be intolerant of conservatives and conservatives would be intolerant of liberals. But if you start looking at the research on political tolerance, it actually doesn't work that way. There's an underlying dimension of tolerance where, if you start denying rights to one group, you start denying rights to all groups. And so what happens is they perceive that the freedom in a society is less when they are denying rights to one groups. So all of the groups that people are intolerant towards are actually correlated together. So people that are intolerant of racists are also intolerant of Muslims. There's a high correlation there. Ironically, surprisingly, disappointingly, they are also less likely to exercise their own political voice. So people that deny political expression to others also perceive that they have less political freedom, so it creates this entire cloud, if you will, over the perception that there is a value in free speech.

WOODS: Is there a way that we measure this? Are we measuring this through polling data? How are we saying definitively that in general the younger generation is less tolerant?

KELLY-WOESSNER: There are several ways of measuring it. One of the standard ones has been to look at a battery of survey questions on the general social survey, and so these are the ones that have been used since the first studies that Samuel Stouffer did when he was looking at tolerance towards communists. And so the questions have been asked every few years for 60 years, and so we can use that to kind of track

tolerance over time. It gets a little complicated, however, because what we find out is that people's groups that they are intolerant towards change over time. So we wouldn't measure tolerance today about how people treat communists, right? They're not the group that people find most threatening. And so the question about attitudes toward those anti-American Muslim clerics is a fairly recent question, and so it's hard to track that measure over time.

What we do know, however, is for the past 60 years ever time we've looked at tolerance, no matter how we've measured it the young people were always more tolerant than previous generations. This is the first time we're seeing evidence that that trend has shifted, and so that is a big shift. So although measures of overall tolerance in a society tend to go up and down — we become less tolerant during times of international crisis, during times of war, we're willing to give up more political rights and freedoms for security. The baseline, if you will, tends to shift over time. But what has always been true since we started studying it is no matter where that baseline was, young people were always more tolerant than their parents. That is no longer the case. And so the fact that that has shifted and changed is something worth noting.

WOODS: It is something worth noting, and it seems that it would be something difficult to account for. Are there theories?

KELLY-WOESSNER: Yes, and what I think you're seeing, and I talk about this a little bit in my blog posts and in the book chapters, is what you're seeing is a fundamental shift in the way that the Left views free speech and the tension between free speech and equality or social justice. And so if you look at people that are 40 years of age or older, they tend to reflect and articulate a classical liberal philosophy, where they argue that free speech rights should be guaranteed even to their enemies. And so among that older cohort or older group of survey respondents, they can have a social justice orientation and be fairly liberal and promote ideas of equality and social justice without it sacrificing free speech. When you look at young people under the age of 40, those who have a higher social justice orientation are less tolerant than those who don't. So what has happened is these classical liberal ideas have given way to ideas that were echoed by the New Left, that there should be an "intolerance of intolerance," is the phrase, that if you want to promote social justice, you actually have to act to silence those who would deny social justice to protect classes of people.

WOODS: I want to read a passage that you yourself quote in your chapter from this figure, Herbert Marcuse, and maybe you can elaborate on it. He says this: he's regretting the fact — and these are now his words — that "tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated, because they are impeding if not destroying the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery. This sort of tolerance strengthens the tyranny of the majority against which authentic liberals protested. Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left." So you're saying that it's that kind of thinking that is really coming to the fore.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Yeah, and I think you hear that more and more in the student voices that are being expressed in college campuses and protests to controversial speakers. In one of the blog posts I wrote, which was a response to John K. Wilson, I quote a student that was writing for *The Harvard Crimson*, and I think her language is very much in line with what we were seeing from Marcuse, the idea that if we want to promote tolerance we need to stamp out or prevent people from speaking if they are intolerant. The challenge with that is who is it that we need to stamp out in order to make a society that promotes social justice? And you think about the question of whether or not you would allow atheists to speak on campus or whether or not you would allow religious people to speak on campus. Both of those groups are intolerant of something, right? Atheists are intolerant of religion; religious people are intolerant of atheists. So if we start taking a position that we're going to silence anyone who's intolerant, well, we can define that to meet our political purposes pretty easily.

WOODS: I know I may have some push back among some of my listeners who may be inclined to say, "A pox on both their houses"; there's plenty of obnoxious behavior on both sides of college campuses, but I just can't go along with that, because I just think back to four solid years of my own experience. I was a Harvard undergrad from 1990 to 1994. I saw it with my own eyes. I was one of the people who — I was certainly on the right wing. There was no doubt about that. I wrote for the right-leaning publications. I was in the right wing groups. That's where I was. And it never, ever occurred to us — ever — to disrupt a speaker or to make jerks out of ourselves or whatever, to scream or whatever, or get up and just be extremely belligerent and rude and obnoxious in the way we addressed people. That never even dawned on us.

Whereas on the Left, we saw this as a matter of course. The sorts of speakers you would get coming to Harvard were a left wing student's dream. I remember at the 1995 commencement ceremony, Angela Davis was there. I mean, she was on the FBI's 10 Most Wanted List at one point. She was a communist who won the Lenin Peace Prize, which of course means she's an opponent of peace. She's a horrifying person, and she's just wandering around, people are getting autographs. This is not normal. I mean, this is a woman who, when she was told that there were prisoners of conscience behind the Iron Curtain, and could you maybe exert some influence to let them out, she said they deserve what they get; let them remain in prison. This is the woman who is the avatar of toleration for these people. It's astonishing.

Well anyway, so this went on constantly. We would bring in one or two speakers who were somewhere in the ballpark of what we believed, and there was always a big uproar about it. So the fact that they would have 99.998% of all speakers in line with their views was not enough. They had to stamp out the occasional dissenter. That's what we're talking about here, is this basic, totalitarian instinct and impulse. This is not a matter of, well, the right wing students do their thing, and the left wing students do their thing, and who's to say who's ultimately to blame. I don't buy that at all. That does not ring true with my experience or with any of my friends'.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Right, and I think — one of the things that I've noticed in the past 10, 15 years is that the protests to campus speakers today are coming more and more

from the student body. And so I think that what we're seeing is this growth in intolerance among students, that they have learned somewhere along the line that any idea at all that might offend somebody doesn't have a place on their campus. So it's a distrust in their own campus environment. It's a distrust in their education, because the classical liberal view was that even if you disagreed with somebody, the best thing to do was to let them speak and then use your own ideas to refute theirs.

This idea that ideas are dangerous and shouldn't even be heard tends to backfire, because what happens is those ideas then fester and are never exposed to light or are never involved in that free marketplace of ideas where they're supposed to be challenged. We're not seeing that challenge on college campuses. And although I know there are lots of conservatives who come out of college campuses and really feel that they didn't get a fair shake, ironically I think that the educational disadvantage is to the liberal students whose ideas are not being challenged, because we know that challenging of ideas is what makes you better critical thinkers, makes you better able to reason and to articulate your positions. And so if they're not getting that challenge educationally, the disadvantage is to those liberal students.

WOODS: There's one thing you said that I think makes the — I know you are a social scientist, and so you have to have a certain decorum, whereas with me, I'm a podcast host, and I can say what's on my mind. I think you're giving too much credit to some of these college vandals — I'll just come right out and put it that way — when we say that what concerns them is that somebody might say something that offends people. I don't think that's true, because they obviously have this very, very selective sensitivity about what offends people. They could not care less if American Southerners are offended, if evangelicals are offended, if Catholics are offended. I don't see any of them saying we need more Scandinavians in the campus orchestra. I mean, obviously it's particular causes and particular ways of thinking that they want to promote. I think it's raw power, and they use an appeal to our sense of fair play and politeness to make it seem as if that's what their movement is all about. But I don't think at root that that's what their movement is all about. I think it's the exercise of raw power and intimidation to silence their opponents, so that people will just keep their mouths shut, because they don't want to be called racists; they don't want to be called haters, so they just keep their mouths shut, they nod their heads, and they do their studies, and they leave.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Right, and I would say — and this just my own personal opinion on it — but I don't know that there is something fundamentally different about liberals and conservatives that causes this difference, but I think what's happening is the ideological imbalance on college campuses creates a situation where liberals are able to shut down ideas much more effectively than conservatives. And so it's a problem of faculties being overwhelmingly Democratic and liberal and the students having the support of faculties who honestly aren't engaged with the other side of the issue. And when we start talking about political tolerance, what we know is that the more exposed you are to different ideas, the more you're exposed to counterarguments, the higher your level of political tolerance. So if you're in a very insular environment

where you're never exposed to those alternative ideas, your tolerance level's going to be very low.

WOODS: Okay, that's certainly a good point, and I can see that as being at root what's going on here. I was very surprised by a conclusion in your paper that seems to be backed up by some of your own work in other areas with regard to the claim that students are being indoctrinated on campus, that they're surrounded by, as you say, people who by and large have a particular point of view. Obviously if you take a sociology course in an American university, 99.9% of time, everybody knows what is about to happen to you. You're not going to get some dispassionate overview of American society. Let's not be silly about this. But you say that by and large when people come out of four years there, their views are more or less unchanged. I find that extremely surprising.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Right, and my own research shows that, but there's a number of other studies that have tracked political views over four years that find the same thing. And what we find is that by the time you're 18 or 19 years old, you have a core set of values that is fairly resistant to change. So students engage in the same type of selective hearing, selective listening that everybody else does. There's a reason why liberals don't listen to Rush Limbaugh, and it's because they don't want to hear what he has to say. And so the same thing happens on a college campus. Students tend to tune out arguments and ideas that challenge their values. Ideally in an educational environment, we wouldn't want that to be the case. We'd want those walls to come down. But what we're seeing is that students are resistant to arguments that counter their fundamental core values. So students aren't moving a lot from freshman to senior year in terms of their politics.

WOODS: It doesn't seem to me there's a whole lot that can really be done about this unless people's attitudes change. You can't make people's attitudes change just by changing university policies. If they still have this impulse to silence people and to argue by trying to intimidate people into silence, you're just dealing with symptoms rather than the core cause. So it seems like this is a fairly grim future, unless some radical changes of mind occur. How do you look toward the future in light of what you've written?

KELLY-WOESSNER: Umm — (laughing) with some concern. One of the things that comes up in my research that I haven't talked about in the blogs is that colleges and universities, although they might have some ability to counter this — if students were really exposed to a multitude of ideas here, theoretically they would learn to become more tolerant to those ideas. But it doesn't begin at college, and so we're seeing students come in as first year students with low levels of tolerance. And I had students in my political science research methods class do a survey of our own campus last year, and they were looking at issues of political tolerance on campus, and they started to look at tolerance levels by major. And they found that some of the lowest levels of tolerance — and I believe this is probably true on all campuses; Elizabethtown College is not unlike a lot of our competitors — the lowest levels of tolerance were coming out of the education majors.

And so I think early on, when you start looking at what's happening in K-12 and the messages that students get there about disagreement and about ideas and the exchange of ideas that might be uncomfortable, I think they're learning these lessons very early on. And so there are strategies and programs that might be directed at K-12 where people are taught the value of free speech and those rights that I think probably are not being taught today the way the once were.

WOODS: Well, I appreciate very much your time today talking about this stuff. Someday I've got to have an episode where I talk entirely about Herbert Marcuse and the New Left. I know that there are some people in my circles — and at one point of my life, even my myself — who had a little bit of sympathy for the New Left of the '60s, just because the Old Left was so terrible, they were openly Stalinist, that you'd think, well, how could these people be so bad? And there was the Berkeley free speech movement, but as you note, this seems to have, in my judgment, been a matter of we want free speech because we want to be able to use it ourselves, but ultimately, despite all our pretty language, we have no intention of observing free speech as a general principle. And so I do think we are living very much with the legacy of the New Left and Marcuse and selective toleration and suppression of alternative points of view. I mean, it was all there. It was right there embedded in these original thinkers, and now it's really coming into fruition all around us with the people who pat themselves on the back for how wonderful and open-minded they are, and yet they have got some of the — and they accuse everybody else of being hateful, and yet I have — I'm one of the people. I'm supposedly a hateful person, because of I don't know what. And yet, I have never seen anybody more filled with anger and hate and loathing than these people who were telling me that that's who I am. So anyway, I really do appreciate your time, and best of luck with your work.

KELLY-WOESSNER: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me on.