Transcript: Is America Losing Its Mind?

A Prager University Video ~Michael Knowles ~ August 22, 2022 ~ https://bit.ly/3wH7Hl4

There are few things worse than being called "intolerant," "inflexible," or "closed-minded." Who wants to be that? Isn't it far better to be open to everything, dismissive of nothing?

Well, not necessarily.

Let's frame this a different way.

Should we have any standards at all? Or should the standard simply be "anything goes?"

These are new questions. For most of American history, standards of acceptable behavior were generally agreed upon.

Today, we can't even agree on the difference between men and women. Those on the Progressive Left seem dead-set on unsettling just about every settled question—all in the name of being "open-minded."

But can your mind be so open that your brains fall out?

Do we need to tolerate every crackpot view under the sun, no matter how harmful? No matter how false? Do we need, for example, to keep an "open mind" on murder? Of course not. That question's settled, and every citizen has an obligation to follow the law. Even if someone doesn't want to. Even if he "identifies" as a serial killer.

How about a more controversial example? Consider the case of Drag Queen Story Hour, an activist organization that sends transvestite men wearing sexualized clothing into elementary schools and public libraries to read books and sometimes even dance in front of little kids.

In the name of tolerance, must we allow men to strap on stilettos and wiggle around in front of toddlers—even when our communities object, even when we know that it's wrong?

This example is a little bit tougher for the "tolerance" crowd, not because the answer is obvious—though it is—but because any way you answer, someone's views are not going to be tolerated. If we answer "yes, we do need to tolerate Drag Queen Story Hour," then we're refusing to tolerate the wishes of parents and taxpayers who don't want their public property used in drag shows for kids.

If we answer no, we're refusing to tolerate the wishes and behavior of the transvestites who want to perform in public schools. There is no world in which the answer to this question accommodates and tolerates everyone and everything.

So, the question that divides us is not whether every public behavior must be tolerated. The question that divides us is which public behaviors should be tolerated and which shouldn't.

For most of American history, if a man dressed up in sexual clothing to perform for children, he'd be arrested. For centuries, America had refused to tolerate all sorts of bad things such as obscenity, the incitement to violence, and public nudity.

Even when such laws and limits have been repealed or gone unenforced, it isn't as though some sort of pure tolerance has blossomed in their place.

Instead, old intolerance has been replaced by new intolerance. Fifty years ago, a teacher might be fired for teaching the Communist Manifesto in school. Today, a teacher could be fired for teaching the Bible in school.

Ten years ago, if you called a man a woman, you'd probably get a punch in the nose. Today, if you refuse to call a man a woman, you might find yourself banned from social media, expelled from school or out of a job.

So, then who decides what those limits of toleration should be? Until relatively recently, the answer was we, the people, decide. It sounds quaint now, but we had what were once called "community standards."

And what were those standards based on?

The short answer is tradition; that is, what has worked well in the past. Today we seem to live in a world with no reference to the past. We live in what British journalist Douglas Murray has dubbed "year zero." It is presumed that we are much smarter than all those who lived before us.

This is a dangerous way of thinking because it's not rooted in anything. And it can be uprooted by the next political fad.

Of course, not everything that was done in the past was good or ought to be preserved into the future. For centuries, slavery was commonplace, but it wasn't good.

But tradition is the anchor that helps us discern the good. It avails us of the wisdom of the ages. And this discernment of the good led us to abolish slavery. Even though some of the Founding Fathers owned slaves, they knew it was wrong. They were anchored in the biblical idea that all men are created in the image of God. And that tension eventually guided the country toward abolition.

If we're going to overturn social norms, the burden of proof that radical social changes are going to make things better should be on the revolutionaries, not on the defenders of tradition: the conservatives. The conservatives have over 3,000 years of history behind them: the Bible, the Magna Carta, English common law, the American Constitution, the Gettysburg Address.

I'll take that over Drag Queen Story hour any day.

How about you?

I'm Michael Knowles, host of the Michael Knowles Show, for Prager University.