Rhetoric Is Essential to the Health of Democracy

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I am often asked why I write op-eds, many of which appear on these pages, and make social media posts. It’s not because I wish to promote myself—I am not a narcissist. One of the reasons is that I believe arguing, as I learned at the University of Iowa (1970-1978) and taught my debaters at Iowa City West High School (1973-1974), is essential to progress in a democratic society.

I also believe people are indeed able to argue constructively—and perhaps do so more frequently than the media and political pundits suggest. As a teacher of Argumentation & Advocacy for nearly five decades at The University of Texas at Austin, I contend that most people are capable of and do engage in “self-risk” (the idea that when one argues in the genuine sense of that term they must enter the exchange admitting the possibility their beliefs could change as a result or argument)—even if they don’t always acknowledge that publically.

My recent social media posts—and the interaction they prompt—provide anecdotal data to prove this, as does the email I receive responding to my op-eds. I appreciate all of those who reply, especially those who don’t share my views yet who respond thoughtfully and constructively. This makes me hopeful that we can transcend the current rancorous and polarized political environment. It’s also why we need to keep teaching students and the public the principles of rhetoric I first learned at Iowa.

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