Discussion is essential for democracy
Our responsibility is to stand up and speak truth to power

For more than 40 years I have taught a college-level course premised on the notion that a free exchange in the marketplace of ideas is a worthy goal. I frequently remind my students that writing letters to the editor and op-eds is an important part of civic life, especially at this challenging time in America’s political history.

As citizens our responsibility is to stand up and speak truth to power. And as a scholar I feel a special duty to use my knowledge and expertise to educate the public.

At the end of the day, what matters is not one’s particular political views but willingness to engage others. Without engagement there is no possibility for persuasion and change — and hence little chance that democracy will survive.

Admittedly, entering the public sphere is not without risks: I often receive hate mail in response to my op-eds and letters. Happily, last week I received this anonymous letter in the U.S. mail postmarked Seattle, Wash., and signed “Another fellow citizen who occasionally struggles.” It reads: “Your perceptive, well-written letter today contains more insight
into basic human nature than is usually found in a few short paragraphs. Thanks for writing it.”

Letters like this remind me (and I hope others) why we should persevere, continuing to publicly express our views in a respectful manner. As long as we do this, our democracy will thrive.

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