What's Old -- and Those Who Are Old -- Can Be Made New Again

HILDSALE, Michigan -- Sometimes, lessons we are trying desperately to unravel about where we are as a country and as a culture are right in front of us. But we've been so distracted by all of the convenience and chaos technology has provided our lives that we've missed what we've always known, not just about where we are going but who we are in that journey.

One of the last assignments I gave my journalism students at Hillsdale College last week was to revisit the children's book "Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel." It's a book my grandmother read my mother when she was a child, one my mother read to me, one I've read to my children, and one my daughter and her husband read to my grandchildren.

The story tells the tale of the hardworking Mulligan and his steam shovel, which he has named Mary Anne, and how they have helped build all the cities across the country. They not only built the big buildings that are the center of commerce in a booming country; they cut the mountains to make tunnels and roads to connect small towns to those cities, along with the bridges, highways and airports needed as our country expanded. The story reinforces how they embraced the dignity of work and the sense of being part of something bigger than themselves through a job that made many people's lives better.

People responded to them by cheering on their work.

Then, along came the diesel shovels and the electric shovels and the gas shovels. They were more advanced and efficient, and contractors no longer hired Mulligan to do the job, because Mary Anne was considered obsolete. Those advanced machines mocked Mulligan and Mary Anne and made fun of them. The big bosses told them to get out, and Mary Anne's steam-shovel peers were all thrown in the garbage dump.

Mulligan, though, believed they still had value. Pushed out of the big city, they built to a smaller rural town. He took a challenge to build a cellar for a town hall in just one day, and to not get paid if he didn't accomplish it. Mulligan and Mary Anne met the challenge but with one problem: In their zest to build the cellar in a day, they forgot to build a way out.

Not only were they stuck but they had also lost the bet. Or had they?

Despite all of the town elders and politicians loudly fighting over how to get Mary Anne out of the cellar, it was a young boy who recognized they had value in a new way: Leave Mary Anne in the cellar; build the town hall over them; and let her become the new furnace for the building and Mulligan become the janitor.

Mary Anne may not have had the advanced technology to keep up with the new advanced construction vehicles, but she still had a purpose. More importantly, she and Mulligan were then integral contributors to their community, regaining purpose and appreciation.

As Isabella Redjai wrote in our class assignment on the story, "It is a testament to the value of
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Community, but also how members of a community can be pushed out after their years of work, because they can no longer find purpose within their community or people have replaced their jobs, which is an unfortunate reality of today.

For Mulligan, life purpose and appreciation were never about accumulating wealth and power. They were always about work ethic, dignity and aspiration.

One of the most persistent themes in my conversations with voters across the country, no matter who they are voting for, has been this outside pressure from our culture to shed the past and how it formed who we are as people, because it has been rendered unacceptable in today's society. The cultural curators in our country, the entities who hold the power and influence in everything we do -- from how we consume our news to how we watch our sports and movies to how we use our phones -- long ago shed any association with people who live and work and pray outside of the super ZIP codes of wealth and power. The cultural elites rarely have anyone in their boardrooms, C-suites, newsrooms or bureaucracies who went to a state school, who sits in a pew every Sunday, owns a gun or grew up in a community with a mix of socioeconomic experiences.

If you don't know anyone like that, how do you sell them soap or craft a tweet aimed at them or market to them or entertain them? You can't.

But because those who can't have the power in how you use technology, interact with institutions, view media, and watch sports and movies, they also have the power to move culture in their direction. They often shame voters into believing they are their friend, that they are part of their tribe when you think, wear and speak the words they want you to.

In short, if you just come to their side, they won't tell you anymore that you are not needed or wanted.

Except, that is not true. You won't be accepted. You will be used -- for your money and your vote. Many of us willingly give that to them so we can be accepted into their world rather than be part of our own communities.

But they still will make fun of you in digital ads, in tweets, in entertainment and in sports. And if not you, they'll make fun of your parents, your siblings, your cousins, your everything.

What I have also learned in interviews with voters is that they don't wear their party's team jersey as much as you think they do. They often vote for their community over ideology. Just ask them.

Which brings us back to Mulligan. The lessons are many, but the most meaningful in this important allegory is to be wary of those who use you for their purpose and then discard you once they've gotten what they wanted.

They never wanted you for your value or appreciated your work ethic.
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Most importantly, remember that problems can get solved if we are willing to see value in what we can do, not what we used to do.

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