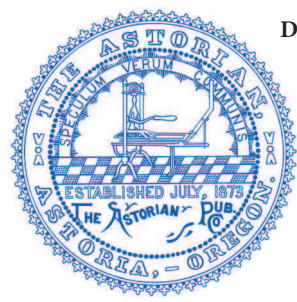


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OUR VIEW

Chemical plant fails the sniff test

This famous line from 1967's "The Graduate" comes to mind when pondering one of the latest large industrial developments planned for the Lower Columbia River: "I just want to say one word to you. Just one word. . . . Plastics."

In that far simpler time 50 years ago, it was plausible to suggest to a fresh college graduate that his future — and indeed the world's — could hinge on that then-new material. Countless uses have been developed for the many varieties of plastic created by chemical laboratories and factories. We're surrounded by it in our vehicles. Our trash cans fill up every day with single-use plastic packing materials. It would take near-fanatical concentration to avoid it entirely.

Though it has yet to make much of an impression upon public awareness here near the mouth of the river, a proposed chemical plant in Kalama, Washington, is exciting much attention elsewhere in the region. The Seattle City Council unanimously voted earlier this month to oppose the \$1.8 billion distillery planned for the banks of the Columbia southeast of Longview. Working its way through the regulatory system, this plant would take methane (natural gas) and convert it into methanol (wood alcohol) for export to China, where it would be chemically manipulated into plastics.

The Seattle council's stance against the Kalama facility is part of a broader reaction to President Donald Trump's repudiation of the Paris climate accords. West Coast cities and states on the front lines of sea-level rise and acidifying seawater are understandably anxious to begin ramping back on fossil-fuel use. Natural gas is a clean and abundant fuel, but also a powerful greenhouse gas in its own right when it escapes in between wellheads and end users. In addition, more common greenhouse gas carbon dioxide is created during the methanol-manufacturing, transportation of the finished product, and conversion into plastic.

Estimates vary, but around 90 full-time jobs will be created by the Kalama plant — insignificant by Seattle standards but a fairly big deal in southwest Washington, where the economy chronically underperforms the metro areas it is wedged between. It's appropriate to seek good-paying industrial jobs for the area. However, it's also appropriate to carefully examine proposals to make certain they don't harm other industries and regional values. Lower Columbia residents know all too well how 20th century industrialization of the river decimated our local fishing industry, for example.

In a helpful overview (tinyurl.com/Kalama-Methanol), Sightline Institute cites project documents that show the plant creating up to 3.6 million metric tons of methanol per year, whereas the largest methanol plant now in existence — in Iran — makes about 2 million tons a year. A facility on this scale would create a number of noticeable impacts and risks in the form of water withdrawals, steam and diesel particulate pollution, and increased danger from tanker traffic and earthquake exposure, according to Sightline's analysis.

From our local standpoint, there is little obvious upside to the Kalama proposal. By bolstering a nearby economy, it conceivably might result in a few more visits to the coast. It's possible the three to six methanol tankers per month transiting to China might sometimes anchor in the estuary and spend money here. And we all use plastic.

On the downside, the facility would place up to 72 million gallons of methanol on water-saturated soil in a region subject to intense earthquakes — spilled methanol that could poison the river and float downstream to us. The facility's routine operations would, according to Sightline, generate five times more diesel-particulate pollution than allowed under state guidelines for air toxics. It would use 5 million gallons of water a day, sending much of it into the air in the form of a steam plumes longer than Mount St. Helens' height a quarter of the time and longer than Alaska's Mount Denali's height 12 percent of the time.

There have always been, and probably will always be, promoters desiring to use Columbia River resources without much effort to be good neighbors. The Kalama plant, promising cheap Chinese plastic in return for significant negative consequences for the Lower Columbia, hasn't yet passed the sniff test as something that gives back more than it takes.

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Daily Astorian.

Letters should be fewer than 350 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone numbers. You will be contacted to confirm authorship.

All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and, on occasion, factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are printed each month.

Letters written in response to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and, rather than

mentioning the writer by name, should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil and people should be referred to in a respectful manner.

Submissions may be sent in any of these ways:

E-mail to editor@dailyastorian.com; online at www.dailyastorian.com; delivered to the Astorian offices at 949 Exchange St. and 1555 N. Roosevelt in Seaside or by mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR 97103.



Miseducating the young

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

A few months ago I had lunch with a former student named Lucy Fleming, one of the best writers I've taught. I asked her what she had learned in her first year out of college. She said she had been forced to think differently.

While in school, her thinking was station to station: take that test, apply to that college, aim for a degree. But in young adulthood, there are no more stations. Everything is open seas. Your main problems are not about the assignment right in front of you; they are about the horizon far away. What should you be steering toward? It requires an entirely different set of navigational skills.

This gets at one of the oddest phenomena of modern life. Childhood is more structured than it has ever been. But then the great engine of the meritocracy spits people out into a young adulthood that is less structured than it has ever been.

There used to be certain milestones that young adults were directed toward by age 27: leaving home, becoming financially independent, getting married, buying a house, having a child. But the information economy has scrambled those timetables. Current 20-somethings are much less likely to do any of those things by 30. They are less likely to be anchored in a political party, church or some other creedal community.

When I graduated from college there was a finite number of career ladders in front of me: teacher, lawyer, doctor, business. Now college graduates enter a world with 4 million footstools. There are many more places to perch (a startup, an NGO, a coffee shop, a consultancy) but few of the footstools pay a sustaining wage, seem connected with the others or lead to a clear ladder of rungs to climb upward.

People in their 20s seem to be compelled to bounce around more, popping up here and there, quantumlike, with different jobs, living arrangements and partners while hoping that all these diverse experiences magically add up to something.

Naturally enough, their descriptions of their lives are rife with uncertainty and anxiety. Many young adults describe a familiar pattern. They try something out but soon feel trapped. They drink too much, worry about how to get out of a job or a relationship. Eventually they do, which is often easier than the anxiety beforehand. They put their life on pause, which is lonely,



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Clatsop Community College's Class of 2017 lines up to enter Patriot Hall in June for a commencement ceremony. Many young people see an uncertain path to a secure and happy future.

while they recover. Then they try something else.

All the while social media makes the comparison game more intrusive than ever, and nearly everybody feels as if he or she is falling behind. Recently I came across a website with popular message tattoos. The ones people chose weren't exactly about carefree youth. They were about endurance and resilience: "I will break but I will not fold"; "Fall down seven times, stand up eight"; "Don't lose yourself in your fear"; "The only way out is through."

Before, there were social structures that could guide young adults as they gradually figured out the big questions of life. Now, those structures are gone.

And how do we as a society prepare young people for this uncertain phase? We pump them full of rapid but haunting praise about how talented they are and how their future is limitless. Then we send them (the most privileged of them) to colleges where the professors teach about what interests the professors. Then we preach a gospel of autonomy that says all the

answers to the deeper questions in life are found by getting in touch with your "true self," whatever the heck that is.

I used to think that the answer to the traumas of the 20s was patience. Life is long. Wait until they're 30. They'll figure it out. Now I think that laissez-faire attitude trivializes the experiences of young adulthood and condescends to the people going through them.

I'm beginning to side with Meg Jay, who argued in her book "The Defining Decade" that telling people "30 is the new 20" is completely counterproductive. Jay's book is filled with advice on how to get on with life. For example, build identity capital. If you are going to be underemployed, do it in a way that people are going to find interesting later on. Nobody is ever going to ask you, "What was it like being a nanny?" They will ask you, "What was it like leading excursions of Outward Bound?"

I'd say colleges have to do much more to put certain questions on the table, to help students grapple with the coming decade of uncertainty: What does it mean to be an adult today? What are seven or 10 ways people have found purpose in life? How big should I dream or how realistic should I be? What are the criteria we should think about before shacking up? What is the cure for sadness? What do I want and what is truly worth wanting?

Before, there were social structures that could guide young adults as they gradually figured out the big questions of life. Now, those structures are gone. Young people are confronted by the existential questions right away. They're going to feel lost if they have no sense of what they're pointing toward, if they have no vision of the holy grails on the distant shore.

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