

Our View

Vaping not so harmless after all

One of the big selling points the “Vaping” industry has been pushing is that the practice of inhaling nicotine-laden mist is a safe alternative to regular smoking.

Turns out, vaping may not be so harmless after all.

In the past few weeks hospitals around the country are reporting several cases of young people checking in with lung infections or problems breathing. The common denominator? They are all practitioners of vaping.

According to Kaiser Health News, the Center for Disease Control, as of Aug. 22, had taken reports of 193 cases of lung disease potentially related to vaping. The cases were reported from 22 states. In Illinois, 34 patients were reported, and one has died.

The medical profession has been warning since the practice became popular that vaping’s dangers need to be studied. The practice is unregulated. People don’t know for sure what is in the solution they are vaping.

It is time for the Food and Drug Administration to step up and start doing its job, to study vaping and its hazards and regulate how it is used.

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Weeds

A steam roller hitting town

By Randy Krzmarzick

I first heard the way I hear a lot of things now. In a text. A group of early risers who share thoughts on baseball and local happenings are my first human contacts. “Did you hear anything about Del Monte?” I hadn’t, but within an hour the Sleepy Eye plant closing was official.

It goes without saying this is big and bad news for our town. As I write, the story is fresh, still in the rumor-stage. One rumor is that the plant will be sold and continue to operate. That would be everyone’s first choice, and I would be glad to see this column become quickly antiquated.

I’m not as connected to Del Monte as some. My dad grew for them way back, and I passed on opportunities to add sweet corn to my crop mix. I worked clean-up crew there in my early farming years. This was in the Eighties when extra cash was welcome. My last day there I got my arm caught in a conveyor and needed surgery to mend it. That’s a story for another day.

I have lived west of Sleepy Eye my whole life, so have driven by the factory more than a few times. A little figuring tells me it might be a hundred thousand. It hasn’t been there forever, but the foreverness of my life. And the lives of everyone else in town. The church, the monument, the factory: those seem things that God put here in Creation.

There is a constant, almost subliminal, awareness in a small town of such a business. Conversation naturally includes factory news. “Del Monte started putting in peas on some of the lighter ground.” “Corn pack’s going to start next week.” “Sweet corn’s running nine tons an acre.” Updates on Del Monte come as easy to conversation as the weather and the Vikings.

In its way, it is an attractive plant, built at a time when brick gave an air of permanency. I’d guess the bricks are from Ochs in Springfield. Hulking conveyors and outdoor machines sit still under snow in winter, then come to life in the summer humming round the clock under sun and spotlights. Railroad tracks head out from the warehouse, hinting at far away destinations for our corn and peas.

Of course, a venerable old building is less the story than the people working inside there. From college kids financing their education to farm folk who needed



Randy Krzmarzick

a side income to the Hispanic workers who became essential to the operation, thousands have worked there in the past and hundreds currently. A press release can’t begin to tell their stories.

Del Monte the company has been bought, sold, bent, and folded by the business world many times. Each time, there were rumors about our Sleepy Eye plant. Currently Del Monte Foods is headquartered in California but is owned by an investor group based in Manila. It’s doubtful anybody there knows much about Sleepy Eye, less about the employees and farmers who depend on this factory for income.

It is part of the same global economy that benefitted American agriculture so much in the last decade. International trade was the main driver of our \$7 corn and \$15 soybeans. In farming years, those prices seem eons ago. Now tariffs are helping to grind our prices into the dirt.

If Del Monte in Sleepy Eye is to be closed, it will join thousands of empty factories across America. We are not unique. The stories are legion about towns having their manufacturing plants mothballed. In each of those, the community is altered forever. There is a distinct line between life before and after the factory closed.

Years ago, I went on a baseball trip to Cleveland and Detroit. Along the way, we drove the remains of the Rust Belt: mile after mile of shuttered steel mills and places that made things with steel. Rust was literally the dominant color. I remember wondering how many jobs weren’t in those massive shops anymore.

Of course, this is capitalism, and this is a dynamic economy. Everyone who goes to Europe comes back impressed with the age of castles and churches they visited. It is different on our side of the ocean, where seemingly nothing lasts. In the movie Field of Dreams, in the scene where James Earl Jones says that baseball is the one constant, he says, “America has rolled by like an army of

steamrollers. It’s been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again.”

He’s right. We know that. But that doesn’t mean it is not unsettling when the steamrollers come to your town. It happened before here a century ago.

When you grow up in a place, you only gradually become aware of things around you. On the opposite side of town from Del Monte is an impressive five story also-brick building with large paned windows up and down. I was probably in high school before I learned that was the old mill building.

The Sleepy Eye Milling Company built it in 1892. This was during a time when our area was literally the center of the international milling industry. Sleepy Eye, Springfield, and New Ulm had booming mills that were shipping the world’s finest flour around the globe. Lots of wealth was flowing to these towns. It is not a coincidence that St. Mary’s Church, the Dyckman Library, and the Depot were all built in 1902.

Soon after, the milling industry went in to decline. A global recession was part of that. The Wheat Belt shifted westward, and our local mills had to transport grain from the Dakotas. Sleepy Eye Milling had several stops and starts as business declined but was closed permanently in 1921. The city tried to find a replacement for what had been its largest employer. Several enterprises set up shop in parts of the mill building through the years, but nothing stuck. Now it sits hauntingly empty and dark over the northeast part of town.

Ironically, officials from California Packing Company first came to town in 1928 to explore the possibility of putting a vegetable canning facility in the mill building. That company, which became Del Monte, did decide to come here. Instead they built a factory on property which had been used for landing airplanes on the southwest edge of town.

There are lots of buildings that are empty or underused around here. Barns and sheds for cows and pigs sit empty on thousands of farm sites. Main streets have storefronts from a time when all economy was essentially local. After a day of driving past farms and through small towns in my part time field inspecting job, I told Pam once, “There are more things around here that used to be than still are.”

Here’s to hoping Del Monte doesn’t become one of the used-to-bes.

Other Editors

ELCA's action a vote for humanity

Despite what some critics are saying, the decision by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to become a sanctuary denomination does not incite law-breaking.

The action clearly embraces the philosophy of Christianity. Jesus didn’t ask anyone for papers before offering them comfort.

The assembly’s vote made the ELCA the first sanctuary denomination in the U.S. That large-scale decision affects 3.3 million members with Minnesota home to the largest ELCA community in the U.S. at about 670,000 members.

How each congregation wants to offer support is an independent decision. Actions may range from providing living spaces for migrants and supporting them in immigration courts to providing language tutoring, food and household supplies. Importantly, the ELCA assembly also voted to provide resources and staff to help congregations navigate the declaration.

The ELCA doesn’t in any way encourage lawlessness as part of its sanctuary efforts. In fact, it says: “Being a sanctuary denomination does not call for any person, congregation or synod to engage in any illegal activity.” The denomination’s sanctuary description also says: “Being a sanctuary denomination is about loving our neighbors.”

Offering help to those in need is what this action is all about and what Christianity is meant to do. ELCA members, many of whom live here, should be proud of their denomination’s decision to stand up for people who have been under attack and obviously need help. The ELCA is already involved in an initiative to partner with agencies in Central America to address the conditions pushing people to the U.S.

Coming to the aid of refugees is a long-held practice of the ELCA. Lutherans started the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, one of the nine refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S. As a church, ELCA has advocated for stopping the detention of children and families for decades.

The ELCA is acting upon its tradition of helping people as a matter of faith not because it is a current political issue in which drawing lines in the sand has polarized our nation.

What would Jesus do? Based on past action, he would back the ELCA’s action.

— The Free Press of Mankato

Quote

You get fifteen democrats in a room, and you get twenty opinions.

Senator Patrick Leahy

Without a suitable enemy, Trump is adrift

By Jonah Goldberg

Last week there was a sharp uptick in speculation that President Trump is a few fries shy of a Happy Meal.

Obviously, this is not the first time the idea has popped up that the commander in chief’s cheese might have slid off his cracker. Early in his presidency, and again in 2018, there was a lot of chatter that Trump should be removed via the 25th Amendment. Through it all, the president responded by insisting he was a “very stable genius.”

But after what has seemed like a personal best in whackadoodle statements over the last few weeks, cable news networks and prominent Twitterati are ratcheting up the talk that the president’s wheel might still be turning but the hamster’s dead.

Whether it was his tweet declaring that American companies “are hereby ordered to immediately start looking for an alternative” to doing business in China, or his decision to cancel a trip to Denmark because the Danish prime minister didn’t have a “nice” reaction to his desire



Jonah Goldberg

to buy Greenland, or his suggestion that Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell might be a greater enemy than China’s premier-for-life, it did seem as if the West Wing’s nurse might have accidentally switched Trump’s meds for M&Ms.

“This is not normal. And I don’t mean that as in, ‘Trump is violating the shibboleths of the Washington establishment,’” wrote the Washington Post’s Megan McArdle. “I mean that as in, ‘This is not normal for a functioning adult.’”

CNN media correspondent Brian Stelter (who often seems to define “media” as Fox News) said over the weekend: “He’s getting worse. We can see it. It’s happening in public but it’s still a very hard,

very sensitive story to cover. I’m talking of course about President Trump, about his behavior, about his instability.”

I’ve long thought that Trump was a perfect illustration of the old observation that rich people are never crazy; they’re just “eccentric.” But I am skeptical that the president’s mental state has gotten worse.

Instead, his situation is getting more precarious and that is making Trump’s Trumpiness more obvious. Specifically, I think the fizzle of the Mueller probe was a grievous blow to the president, for the simple reason that it removed an extremely useful political and psychological boogymen.

Robert Mueller’s investigation allowed Trump to give voice to his persecution complex. In his mind, at least, the “witch hunt” was an all-purpose excuse to whine about “fake news” and distract from other controversies. But it also served the same function for much of the right-wing media, giving them a ratings-and-clicks-rich topic to focus on.

In a sense, Mueller was a substi-

tute for Hillary Clinton. Trump’s 2016 opponent was such a reviled figure on the right, she gave many Trump-skeptical voters the excuse they needed to overlook his shortcomings. After the election, Mueller and his “angry Dems” of the Deep State served as a serviceable alternative to imposing cohesion and message discipline on the right. Just consider all of the books and thousands of hours of TV programming dedicated to the subject.

With Mueller gone, Trump is left scrambling to find a replacement. The “squad” — the four left-wing Democratic first-term congresswomen — are, collectively and individually, candidates. And they certainly have their political uses, given their radicalism, hostility to Israel, etc. His base is happy to go all-in against them. But attacking four women of color has its limits as a political strategy, especially given that Trump’s electoral Achilles’ heel is suburban moderate women.

Also, they pose no serious threat to Trump’s presidency the way Mueller seemed to, so they do not focus Trump’s mind the way the

special prosecutor did.

Right now, the leading candidate for Trump’s Mueller replacement is Powell. And that dog won’t hunt. Trump is clearly convinced that the Fed chair is trying to destroy his reelection chances by not lowering interest rates to goose the economy past the 2020 finish line. Some will think this is bat-guano bonkers, others won’t, but the political reality is that this storyline is just too complicated to replace the Mueller narrative. It doesn’t attract allies the same way, and the talking points required to sustain it are just too convoluted.

Whether or not he’s a stable genius, the Trump on display now is the same one we’ve always seen. What’s changed are the circumstances. Like an unsteady man long held upright by pushing on a locked door, he’s tumbling now that the path is suddenly open. He needs some new enemy to brace against, and he’s flailing around in search of one. That makes him appear wobblier than before, but he’s exactly as unbalanced as he’s always been.

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