NARCISSISM TODAY

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NARCISSISM PERFECTED BY OBSCURE AMERICAN

Cambridge, MA, February 1 -- Here in the self-absorption capital of the world, an MIT nerd, working practically alone, has expanded the frontiers of narcissism. After forsaking his family and friends for two years to dig his start-up companies out of their respective holes, Philip Greenspun decided to send out one of those incredibly obnoxious New Year's recitals of one's achievements.

Dr. Donald Goethe of the Jung Institute in Zurich said that "it would be audacious for him to assume that any of his friends would read something like that after he didn't return phone calls for two years. Even more impressive is mailing it out two months late. But what really impressed the World Narcissological Society is that he did in on a Macintosh and had it *typeset*, not just laser printed. I have devoted my professional life to narcissism and have never seen anything to rival this."

Massachusetts' own Michael Dukakis glumly stated that "what hurts is that Greenspun surpassed me all by himself. No therapy, pop psych books, or even a New York *Times* subscription."

GREENSPUN WORKED 100 HOURS/ WEEK IN 1989 AND ACCOMPLISHED VIRTUALLY NOTHING

Melrose, MA, February 1 -- Despite his success in the field of narcissism, looking back over Greenspun's life in 1989, one is shocked by a bleak picture of incompetence and futile effort. "Greenspun is slow. Some say he's stupid," dispassionately wrote an anonymous student evaluating his performance as an EE instructor at MIT. The events of 1989 certainly include nothing to contradict that greasy-faced undergraduate.

The year started with the January 8th wedding of Harry Greenspun, Philip's brother and the youngest sibling. Harry was a third year med student in Baltimore ("the armpit of Maryland") living with a law student. He met Julie Finkel, a fifth year med student in July. By August, the law student was out, Julie was in and the wedding date was set for January. Working straight through Thankgsiving and too neurotic to take a weekend down in D.C., Best-man Philip had never met Julie until the night before the wedding. He found her intelligent, sensible, beautiful, and hard-working; Harry had clearly learned something at Harvard.

A few days later, Philip was shellacked at the MIT Enterprise Forum in Cambridge. After reading the Isosonics business plan for an admitted five minutes, a gang of venture capitalists and accountants told him what a pinhead he was.

After that debacle, Greenspun began to reflect on his slaving away since 1978 in a Pyrrhic attempt to rise to the top of the Lisp hacking heap. Harry and Julie, both of whom are going into anaesthesiology, will have an enormous income guaranteed by the monopoly power of the AMA. Greenspun's real salary had declined since he was 18 and he began to question whether founding start-ups was really the easiest way to make a living.

Move to Cambridge

February was the big move of ConSolve, the computer-controlled bulldozer company, and Isosonics, the digital audio recorder company, from the basement and attic in Melrose to a dumpy garage near MIT. Assuming a ruinous rent burden for a cramped slum felt somehow like progress. ConSolve had been struggling to recover from the failure of its plan to raise R&D dollars from American construction firms, most of whom are quite happy to continue using 19th century techniques until the Japanese wipe them out.

February also saw a grim trip to Peoria, IL in an unsuccessful attempt to bleed Caterpillar. They couldn't afford to fork over $300k out of the $10 billion they sucked in last year, but they could afford to pay 10 senior guys to sit around and listen to our pitch for a day. To the chagrin of his smooth partner, ConSolve's president, Greenspun the diplomat said, "we can't afford to come out here and sit around. Why don't you fork over a miserable $50,000 to at least cover our costs of dealing with you." They came up with an ultrasecret project controlling a 150-ton rock truck in the Arizona desert.

In April, Greenspun filed his first patent, which covered a circuit that automatigically preserves the direct track access convenience of a CD after one has copied it with an Isosonics PCM 44.1. Desperately overextended at Isosonics, Greenspun brought in Bruce Keilin, an amazing hardware engineer, and tried to turn over

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1990 FORECAST REMAINS GLOOMY

January, 1990 brought a relaxing trip to the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show, where 1000 people passed judgement on Isosonics' digital audio product line and marketing plans. Reaction was pretty much as expected, with about 20% of the attendees ready to buy the existing product. Isosonics didn't take orders however, because the Show is only attended by dealers and distributors and they want to sell direct.

Due to VidCode's $7500/week penalty clause, the weeks after CES were even worse than those before, with things left undone, people pointing fingers at each other and everyone agreeing on little except the root of the company's problems: management.

A bright spot was an MIT IAP course that Greenspun and Isosonics' amazing lawyers organized called *Starting Companies the Hard Way*. For four days varied speakers spoke on the theme of unrelenting torment for those foolish enough to abandon successful technical careers to found start-ups.

Greenspun's talks were so maudlin that they resulted in numerous offers of help from audience members.

Greenspun also taught a medium format studio photography course. The highlight here was a request by one of the students for an evaluation of photos of an unattractive woman, partially clad in a floral-print plastic shower curtain, brutalized with an on-camera flash.

1989: FITTING CLOSE TO DECADE OF MEDIOCRITY

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the managment to someone completely ill-equipped for the job whose tenure at the company was brief and whose failure to perform resulted in Greenspun's promotion to President-for-Life.

Sojourn at Dude Ranch

Greenspun spent some time in the spring hacking out extensions to ConSolve's *Site Controller* product and finally holed up in a trailer in the desert for a month.

Imagine a dry place 30 miles from civilization where Caterpillar has been demolishing the mountains for 40 years. The roads in this wasteland are so dusty that you can get lost in your own dust if you drive more than 2 mph, which can be hazardous because of potholes the size of Toyotas designed to test truck suspensions. It hit 116 degrees almost every day.

Imagine standing near a truck bigger than a house that goes 20 mph with no driver. You can't hear anything over the 1200 hp engine except the periodic 500 ft. overflights by F15 and F16s dogfighting in the wasteland. You can't see anything in the dust until it is on top of you.

The following shed some light into this particular corner of hell:

- the nice, laid back, competent and hard-working CAT guys who were satisfied with ConSolve's product
- the $150/night resorts that charge $60/night in June (try tennis in the sun when it is 110 in the shade)
- isolation from multiple commitments and being able to concentrate on doing one thing well
- visiting with Suzanne, his older sister, and nephews Norman (2.5) and David (0.75) at husband Jeff's parent's retirement house in Sun City West.

While he was in Arizona, a storm blew two enormous trees down on Greenspun's childhood home in Bethesda, MD, forcing his recently-retired parents to return from a European vacation.

After the big demo, Rebecca, who is almost finished with her Ph.D. in ocean physics at MIT, flew out for a 10-day desert holiday. Greenspun tells the story on Page 3.

Southern California Days

Greenspun spent the rest of July cleaning things up at ConSolve and Isosonics and attending a conference in Santa Barbara on large spatial databases. Greenspun flew into LA, visited the Getty Museum , and barged in on cousin Harry Gittes in Beverly Hills. Harry was relaxing after finishing *Breaking In*, another movie the critics liked and the public didn't, despite a great performance by Burt Reynolds. You know you're in LA when your cousin eats blended nuts for breakfast, sings "If I Only had a Brain" to his Akita, calls his wife "The Baby Factory" and the TV news gives a numbered outline of the daily gang murders.

August brought a patent filing for ConSolve on a location system and the escalation of tension between Greenspun and ConSolve. The tension began as a result of Isosonics and ended with everyone having diametrically opposed points of view. ConSolve originally agreed to share with Isosonics, but ended up unhappy with the arrangement.

Moving and Stripping

In September, ConSolve kicked Isosonics out to a yuppie rehabbed brick mill 1.5 blocks away. For a coal strip mining demo, Greenspun extended *Site Controller* to build a complete 3D model of the subsurface from boring data. Queries into that model could take the form *If I mined from the bottom of the Stockton Seam to the top of the Upper Coalburg, how much rock would I have to dig per ton of burnable coal?* or *Based on nearby borings, what is the ash content of coal underneath the mouse cursor?* The potential customer, a despoiler of the West Virginia landscape, said the demo did everything a $200,000 system that they already owned did, was 100 times faster and was interactive; they also didn't buy (yet).

October was mostly shooting a video for Caterpillar, shooting fashion ads and annual report stills with Henry, and above all, Isosonics. Mindless expansion had brought the headcount up to three paid engineers (Bart, Brewster and Bruce) plus volunteers (Greenspun, EE grad student Henry Wu and EE professor Bill Dally). Henry and Greenspun converted an extra 1000 sq. ft. into a great photo studio (14 ft. ceilings, wide seamless, 4x5 Sinar, 120 Rollei). October brought Act I of the strange saga of VidCode. This company was financed by v.c.'s who had always said that Isosonics was worthless.

In August, Greenspun discovered that what VidCode wanted to do was recognize bits in video that identified particular TV commercials and report to advertisers when their commercial was aired for auditing purposes. He FAXed them that Isosonics could do something like this trivially since "we pull 1.4 Mbits/second out of video."

In October they finally showed up to explain their problem again and all the years and money they'd spend trying to solve it; Isosonics replied, "we can do that in a weekend." They shelled out $4500 when the problem was solved (Nov 7) and bought a $200,000 license on Dec 1.

November found Greenspun getting squeezed out of ConSolve, driving down to D.C. to see the rebuilt homestead and working on VidCode and a private placement (bleeding money from the rich) for Isosonics.

In December, Greenspun was overwhelmed with completing the Isosonics business plan, delivering a printed-circuit board design to VidCode ($7500/week penalty clause), getting ready to show off the PCM 44.1 at the Consumer Electronics Show (Jan 6 in Vegas), salvaging an old consulting contract with Fidelity Investments that he had turned over to friends and getting criticized by everyone for substandard performance.

Looking Back

Although Greenspun learned a lot about circuits in 1989 and hacked out some fairly complex code, this seemed mostly a year of frustration and mind-numbing dealings with business issues. Normally, Greenspun spent 40 hours/week doing good technical work and 40 hours having fun. In 1989, he substituted frustrating business activities for the fun and vividly demonstrated the *Peter Principle*. (L.J. Peter, 1969, a must read).

With each startup, Greenspun took on more business responsibilities and each startup was more difficult. Naive observers blamed the hostile venture capital climate. Students of Peter recognized the simple truth: A competent programmer, Greenspun found his level of incompetence as an entrepreneur.

"All the well-intentioned advice I received was mutually contradictory so that there was no way to reduce the net amount of criticism," said Greenspun. "Many times I wished that I had stayed in graduate school where people get smarter. My life can be pretty hard. And it takes up all of my time."

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BEAUTY AND BEAST IN CANYONS

by Philip Greenspun

When Rebecca and I met, I was a lively individual enjoying literature and the arts, learning sophisticated mathematics and playing tennis four days a week. I had become a work-obsessed gnome, enervated and shackled to two struggling start-ups. It was a mystery to me why anyone would want to share any part of my life. Even Bex's inordinate tolerance was sorely tested and I thought that a desert vacation together might put some romance back in our life.

We spent Thursday buying provisions in Phoenix and cleaning up at Caterpillar. Thursday afternoon we set off on a two hour drive to Prescott, a Mexican dinner and the world's oldest rodeo. An hour out of Phoenix, the familiar (to me) and novel (to her) beauty of the desert set a mood where all was forgiven.

A tip from an acid-head paintrix resulted in us discovering an obscure and beautiful trail in Oak Creek Canyon's West Fork on Friday.

Monument Valley

We rolled into beautiful Monument Valley, UT Friday night. This is an undeveloped park deep inside the Navajo Nation with unique scenery, an unpaved 17-mile canonical tour and the requirement that one hire an Indian guide before going off the main road. A harrowing Sunday drive straight up the face of a mesa brought us to mundane Natural Bridges park for two hours of flat midday light. We proceeded to Capitol Reef National Park in the afternoon, with a refreshing spontaneous swim in a northern reach of Lake Powell on the way.

Capitol Reef

Capitol Reef is a beautiful and empty park. The main tourist car sightseeing route is fairly empty and hiking relatively easy (5 miles, 2500 feet of climb) trails, we saw no one. Bex, fresh from a Cape Cod dance company and in peak physical condition, expressed astonishment that I didn't suffer a heart attack when dragging my 200 lb. carcass up the mountain, especially considering my photographic burden: rented Hasselblad with three big Zeiss lenses, two film backs, various filters and a tripod, plus a marvelous new Nikon autofocus system (N8008) with four lenses. I attributed my physical stamina to professional dog wrestling.

Bryce Canyon

From Capitol Reef, we proceeded down scenic Utah Highway 12 to Bryce Canyon for Monday and Tuesday (July 4) nights. I found it much changed from my post-MIT graduation trip in 1982. The rim was crowded with Germans and French. However, a tough 8 mile hike with 3,000 feet of climbing brought total isolation. Note that the rim is 8000 feet above sea level.

Lake Powell, nee Glen Cyn

From Bryce, we proceeded to Lake Powell and rented a 150 HP boat for a day. Lake Powell used to be Glen Canyon, a place regarded as more beautiful than the Grand Canyon by the explorer Powell. Because of a political dispute over Colorado River water, they dammed the Canyon and filled it up to just below the rim. Even if the dam is washed away in 100 years, the canyon will be filled with silt by then. The ultimate irony is that they named the resultant lake after Powell, who loved the canyon so well.

Waterskiing across Lake Powell is certainly easier than hiking through the desert, so it wasn't a total loss. We didn't waterski, but, with Captain Bex at the helm, did explore some of the intriguing 2000 miles of coastline only accessible by boat.

From Lake Powell, we proceeded to the Grand Canyon's south rim. Driving in, one is admonished by the Park Service not to buy jewelry from Indians at the overlooks. We kicked the Indians out of some nice property in and around the Grand Canyon and now won't let them sell jewelry on their own land. I felt ashamed.

Futon Death March

At sunrise, we began hiking down into the canyon, despite screaming rangers ("it's 118 at the bottom, the hottest weather in 100 years, you're going to die, someone died last week..."). It's only 17.5 miles and 1 mile of elevation. We walked down the Kaibab trail, a steep trail that follows a ridge line and consequently has spectacular views the whole way. Taking our time and lots of pictures with the Nikon (I decided not to schlep the Blad), we were at the Phantom Ranch Touch-Tone® pay phone at the bottom in four hours. I called Mom using MCI.

We stocked up on turkey sandwiches and lemonade from a woman who told us we were going to die ("someone died last week"), hung out in the cafe until the temperature hit 110, then struck out for two miles along the river on Bright Angel Trail. Wetting our clothes in the river every 1/2 mile or so and drinking alot, we stayed comfortable. The Bright Angel Trail up to the rim follows a stream bed, so the views are more intimate and lush -- we even saw a deer. This is also the right way to walk out of the canyon since the water supply and phone line for Phantom Ranch come down this route. There are water fountains and emergency phones every few miles going up, not to mention rangers telling you you're going to die.

The best part of walking out was when mule trains passed. Hikers are supposed to sit by the side of the trail while mule trains pass, going down in this case. People on the mules can see that you are hiking uphill, freighted down with water and cameras. Did this stop them from moaning about the heat and the effort and stopping the train so the leader could spritz them with water? No. Did it occur to them that all they had to do was park their ass on the back of a mule for a few hours? No. I have great pictures of these mule sitters swooning.

Bex and I walked out of the Canyon at sunset, still somewhat alive and drove two hours to Flagstaff, AZ. At 6 AM, we rose from our fleabag motel, drove two more hours to Phoenix and flew back to Boston (Sunday, July 9).

Upon our return to Melrose, Rebecca said that, although we'd had a great time together in the desert, the vacation had only reminded her of how enjoyable life could be without an obsessed maniac and I was thus unceremoniously dumped.

Epilogue: Bex and I rebuilt a romance in the fall by mutually promising not to slavishly spend each weekend watching each other work. Rather we set aside time for real dates: Symphony, theatre, frolicking on Martha's Vineyard, and visiting Dartmouth College so George could eat cousin Jennifer's 3 lbs. of fudge and 2 lbs. of cookies, including aluminum foil, then throw up 24 hours later.