

VOICES

FROM THE DESK OF
WILLIAM W. GREER

In a Single Wire, a New World

THANKS for taking me home to Shangri-La," wrote A. J., a Nepali student attending West Virginia University. "I'm learning in mountaineer country, or so they say, but I miss the real mountains." My story of a trek to Rara Lake, in the remote western Himalayas of A. J.'s homeland, had struck a chord.

A. J. is a member of a whole new community that I discovered when, at age 40, I left the canyons of Wall Street as a technology consultant to create a business in my Brooklyn brownstone. The venture, started a year ago with my wife, Diane, consists of a couple of tables with metal boxes atop them, connected with a strand of wire that eventually runs out a back window to the world at large, the global village of the Internet's World Wide Web.

Our Web site blends our technology careers and our avocation for hiking in mountains around the world. It presents our collection of personal reminiscences, photographs and miscellanea from our global rambles. Commercially, it offers a showcase for products and services that help users fulfill their outdoor dreams.

Initially, however, I feared that our home office would be an isolated oasis. In my Wall Street life, investment bankers screaming in one's face could make the blood flow. The stress might soar, but the gears of the brain would also spin as one matched wits with a brilliant financier or a corporate Machiavelli. I was afraid that my four walls would not offer the same stimuli as a flesh-and-blood circle of business friends, colleagues and rivals.

Instead, that strand of wire has become a virtual lifeline stretching far beyond the horizons of my former career. Now, 150,000 guests enter our home each month to see what's new on GORP: the Great Outdoor Recreation Pages.

In my former career, my global journeys vented the steam that built in the pressure cooker of high finance. Now their recounting entertains masses. But numbers alone do not replace the camaraderie of a corporate family. The special guest, like A. J., who leaves a heartfelt note; the long-lost friend who turns up at our virtual doorstep, the wilderness volunteer who needs another helping hand — they are creating the new community that nourishes the intellect and the soul.

Jim surfaced one day, an employee from my corporate days who had returned to his

William W. Greer, an independent management consultant in his free time, is now most frequently found on GORP at <http://www.gorp.com>.

home in Chicago several years ago. He, too, was suffering the loneliness of the small entrepreneur as he created multimedia programs in the confines of his apartment. His first check had just arrived, and he shared some of his euphoria with us in a note on the kudos GORP was getting in the Midwest. I promised to pray for the prosperity of his venture.

Justin solicited my advice on the ins and outs of the archeology profession. He must have run across my story of the Chimney Rock, an archeological area in Colorado, from which the Anasazi observed miraculous astronomical phenomena. My fantasy of prehistoric life atop this mesa evidently rang true, for this aspiring student wanted to know about my own schooling and jobs in the field and how he could get himself on a dig.

Twelve-hour days on Wall Street provided spare cash to respond to solicitations from countless worthy causes, but it also gave plenty of excuses to avoid volunteering scarce time. Now, opportunities for involvement abound, and I can give the time and effort. Tim wrote me about Sealegs, a sailing program offering instruction and recreation to people with disabilities. We have had an extended correspondence, which, we hope, will culminate in a Sealegs page on GORP.

For years, I have enjoyed the fruits of conservation on our treks, but my personal contribution was merely a commitment to "leave no trace." Now environmental advocates rely on GORP to get the word out.

Liz wrote from Wyoming, eager to ease the strain on the popular Cloud Peak Wilderness, over which she keeps watch. She promises to send information to help hikers find equally magnificent but less burdened lands for their adventures.

Another A. J., this one from California, wants to encourage conservation-conscious pursuit of his passion, back-country horsemanship. As an avid hiker who has cursed the mudholes created by passing hoofs, I now see opportunities for shared use of a precious wilderness resource in a way that benefits all.

The commercial side of our Web site exists because Wall Street taught us that only a focus on cash flow could insure the continuation of our venture, however emotionally rewarding. Many guests avidly pursue activities from hiking to biking, paddling to fishing. Our showcase of products and services helps them enjoy their outdoor adventures and helps us pay down the annual \$20,000 to \$25,000 cost of our Internet line. Our paying clients display their wares on GORP, finding customers of their own



Thomas Kerr

among enthusiasts.

Spencer, a Vermont bookseller, receives raves for his selections of adventure travel reading. Steve, a tour operator, uses his love of Asian culture to entice our visitors to journey with him to distant lands. Dick has developed a virtual trade in classic fishing tackle, finding an audience enamored of the craftsmanship of an old bamboo fly rod. Our most recent addition, Bill from Montana, recruits outdoor lovers to jobs in national parks. More important, he inspires us to keep our own outdoor dreams alive with tales of wolves howling on a starry Yellowstone night at 32 below.

WIDENING interests and diverse friends are the harvest of our interactions on a seemingly impersonal medium that connects brownstone office to university dorm to Himalayan haven. How ironic that my most remote journey, to Rara Lake, when I saw only one Westerner in three weeks, is the single event that most breaks down the invisible barriers erected by my retreat from corporate life.

The shared experience of this paradise, hidden behind impenetrable mountains, has attracted not only a Nepali student but also Chess, who visited the same year I did and offers his own stories for our electronic library, and Andrew, who lived among the local Karnali people decades earlier.

Another visitor, Kalpak, gave our group an Asian perspective, questioning my observations on how his countrymen viewed the world. My comment that travelers have noted for years that South Asians could not visualize a three-dimensional object in a photograph drew a skeptical retort. The potential for cross-cultural exchange within this wired world, I am now convinced, will help us break down past biases.

To these and other virtual friends, I say "Namaste" (nah-MAH-stay) — welcome to those who have not enjoyed a Nepali smile. My office door is always open. □

Standoff in

IN the new frontier that is cyberspace, the showdown is still being played out in the streets of a small town. On one side are the citizens bent on protecting their privacy; on the other are the hackers who explore this unmapped territory, seeking to undermine the safeguards that protect citizens' privacy, even if it means entering their town.

This is how the public debate over cyberspace security has been framed by users, are, indeed, worried about Yankelovich Partners survey, mostly selected on-line users, older, by telephone in mid-1995, found that 90 percent agree that Internet security is needed to protect personal and financial information accessible to unauthorized people. Most believe it is too easy to get a card number to be stolen if it is on the Internet. And almost 70 percent believe that pornography on the Internet is beyond reasonable bounds.

Women even more than men (75 percent versus 55 percent) believe that more information is needed to police the Internet. The kinds of information access that need to be more closely monitored (75 percent versus 49 percent)

The concerns are not unjustified. The headlines tell of network security and the growth of cyber-porn, renegade hackers and crusade against material have brought fort. But as outlaws are brought and the momentum builds for the system secure, the risks to users are loudly denounced.

A cyberspace that offered privacy and decency would clearly be a boon. But recognizing that this simple technology is achievable, more users put security and decency at the top of their list. Fifty-three percent of users agree that guaranteeing privacy is more important than the privacy of each user.

This is not really surprising. One special about cyberspace is that users can operate in anonymity, but their line experiences are under the spotlight. In cyberspace, users choose combinations of information management from a new wealth of options, thrilled by the power to interact. It is likely, in fact, that as it improves, on-line users will find self-interest to reveal more and

J. Walker Smith is a manager at Atlanta for Yankelovich Partners.

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