SUNSHINE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

I often use this space to muse on some major news story for the month, but once in a while I take a break from the news and embark on some kind of quirky person odyssey in 500 words. Maybe this time I'm doing a little of both.

A most interesting deal went down the day before this issue went to print. If I had written this page yesterday, I wouldn't have been able to talk about it. The big news is that Sun purchased MySQL. By the time you read this, of course, this deal will have been blog fodder for several weeks, but from my cozy vantage point of the recent past, the story is still quite pristine.

My initial reflections are surprisingly personal – not sentimental exactly, but still somehow emanating from an unexplored corner of my past. I was never a Solaris admin, but I have been around IT for years and, like the rest of us, I have marked the vicissitudes of Sun's fortunes.

Sun Microsystems once inhabited the very interesting middle ground between old-guard hardware giants like IBM and new-age software companies such as Oracle and the Linux vendors. Their high-end hardware was much in demand, and their software served a steady niche for the admin crowd. But fortunes change quickly in this business. Hardware prices dropped, and the competition stiffened. Linux slowly caught up with Solaris, and Sun was looking a little lost.

When the shine went off Sparc and Solaris, Sun appeared to enter a chasm of creative paralysis. They tinkered around for a while, rolling out creations like the Java Desktop (a Gnome knockoff that didn't have very much to do with Java). Of course, they still had revenue from support contracts with their customer base, but such things don't last forever. And they were doing the web service thing, but they had plenty of competition. Some observors were already counting Sun as a casualty of the high-tech natural selection pendulum, but whether they survived or not, it was hard to see if anything lay ahead besides hype.

I attended the Java One conference in San Francisco around that time, and Sun seemed particularly lost – as if they didn't want to be IBM anymore and were trying to be more like Microsoft or Apple. The emphasis was not on technology but on promoting and projecting "Java" as a brand. The guest of honor for the event was Java creator James Gosling, who Sun was attempting to cultivate as a Steve-Jobs-like Herculean icon. In one of the more bizarre moments of the show, the keynote address, which was supposed to feature Gosling, began with the sad announcement that the star was unexpectedly detained and would not be able to make the event. The crowd fell predictably into a state of momentary despond, but their hopes suddenly lifted when the announcer cried…"No…we were just kidding…he really is here…HERE HE IS!" At which point, James Gosling emerged from behind a curtain and began launching t-shirts into the audience using a homebuilt device resembling a catapult.

I stopped going to Sun conferences, so I don't know if they are still using some variation of this shtick, but from what I can see, it looks like they might have a little more on their minds these days. The MySQL purchase, following on the heels of the OpenSolaris initiative, shows that the sun might not be setting yet.

Joe