

CUPERTINO JOE

By

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By all accounts, he was a pretty scary guy—often stopping and staring at passersby’s. His neighbors gave him the nickname “the Gaper.” As a youngster he was considered a dimwit and prone to a violent temper. His contemporaries reported he was “absent minded, awkward and nervous”—a dullard—kind of a scatter brain, unable to complete a sentence or express a thought. If that wasn’t eerie enough, it’s reported that by his mid-twenties he would suddenly simply rise into the air and “soar in the sky.” A ghoulish kind of guy, he freaked people out. These are not at all the traits of a saint but that’s who he is—the patron saint of flyers.

Giuseppe (Joseph) Desa was born in Cupertino, Italy in 1603. His father, heavily in debt, had died a few months before and his home had been confiscated to pay off those debts. His mother gave birth to him in a shed behind the house where she was hiding from creditors and shame. “As a child he was underfed and sickly.” He suffered from what today would be called a learning handicap—barely able to read or write. It’s reported that his frustrated mother “wearied of him” and was abusive “punishing him without mercy.” Understandably he grew up insecure and suffered from serious self-worth issues. Throughout his life he considered himself “dumb like an ass.”

Unable to learn, his mother apprenticed him to a shoemaker—a trade he was unable to master. “He never learned to make or mend a shoe.” At seventeen a “begging” friar came to the village of Cupertino and he became enamored with the religious life. He sought admittance to several religious orders but because of his lack of education he was turned down. His persistence paid off and he was finally admitted as a lay brother to a religious community. There he was considered unbearable. Desa would drop to his knees into prayer “utterly oblivious of everything around him” at odd times—when washing dishes or carrying food in the refectory—dropping and breaking dishes. As punishment and in hopes of curing him “broken plates were fastened to his habit.” The humiliation didn’t work. Finally he was defrocked and expelled from the monastery. Desa sought help and refuge from an uncle and again his mother—both of whom turned him down. It was the low point of his life. He was destitute living as a homeless man.

In his early twenties he was finally admitted to a Franciscan monastery as a servant. It was at this point where there seemed to be a transformation. He “became more humble and gentle, more careful and successful at his work.” He went into the streets on his own and begged for the poor. It “was noticed [by the priests] that he was welcomed among the poorest of the poor, who saw better than others the man behind all the oddities.” He was given another chance and despite his learning difficulties was finally ordained a Catholic Priest in 1628.

Even as a priest he was still an oddball. Reports that have survived nearly four centuries reveal that he saw holy visions and he would “stand fixed as a statue, insensible as a stone, but nothing could move him.” His colleagues would prick him with pins and burn him with “embers to recall him to his senses” but he was oblivious to the pain. He called his religious visions “fits of giddiness.”

Two years into his priesthood in Cupertino, the eccentric Giuseppe was in a procession honoring the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi when he “suddenly soared into the sky where he remained hovering

over the crowd.” When finally descended, he was so embarrassed that he fled to his mother’s house to hide. It was the first of what would become many incidents of levitation which earned him the nickname “The Flying Saint.” The soaring episodes increased—in the church during Mass, in the refectory during meals with plates of food in his hands. “Over seventy times, people saw him rise from the ground while saying Mass or praying.” On one occasion while out begging he flew into a tree. “Once when some workmen were laboring to plant a stone cross in its socket, Joseph rose up above them, took up the cross and placed it in its socket for them.” His most famous flight “allegedly occurred during a papal audience before Pope Urban VIII.” One historian, Father Christopher Sharrock, recounts that some of these levitations would last upwards of seven hours. He was also proclaimed a healer “touching the blind eyes” of one young child making her see. Historic accounts reveal he had the capacity to “lift up sick children” and cure them.

As his flights and healing powers evolved and became known, pilgrims and the sick began to seek him out. Desa’s strange powers, oddball character and wanderings were questioned by church authorities as his following increased. Church officials convened an inquiry. During the investigation he was imprisoned—a normal procedure at the time during *inquisitions*. The problem confronting church authorities was that he was developing his own following, which was seen as contradicting the church’s authority and teachings. There is some evidence that he may have been subjected to an exorcism but his levitations continued. Ultimately he was declared innocent. Even so he was turned over to a cloistered religious order where he was “forbidden to speak to anyone other than the other religious around him.” He was forbidden to write letters or receive any. His whereabouts were hidden from society. Desa was under constant surveillance. When discovered by pilgrims seeking him out “for the privilege of hearing him say Mass,” he would be transferred to another religious order with “the same regulations enforced.” This transfer occurred numerous times over the last two decades of his life. His fellow friars would observe him kneeling in the garden praying “when he would rise in the air, still in a kneeling position.” They recalled his ability to read their minds and his visions of things such as the death of a pope before it was known to the population.

St. Joseph whose life was marked by ecstasies and levitations died in 1663. He was canonized a saint in 1767. At the Vatican library are thirteen volumes known as the Process of Canonization. In it is “recounted the numerous testimonies of witnesses (including princes, cardinals, bishops and doctors) who knew St. Joseph personally and in many cases were eyewitnesses to the wonderful events of his life.”

St. Joseph was what today would be called a paranormal or mystic. Simply stated, paranormal are things that occur “outside of science’s current ability to explain or measure.” During his lifetime, levitation and visions were often confused with “witchcraft” and “demonic possession.” His confusing behavior bewildered and scared people and church officials. Levitating has not only been ascribed to Christian personalities but in other world religions too. The Indian saint Nagendranath Bhaduri is reported to have levitated in India. Another Indian saint Gyaneshwara is also reported to have levitated. And of course, Jesus walked across water.

In recent years, levitation has been considered magic—performed on stage by magicians—using specialized tricks to stimulate optical illusions. It’s the fictional stuff of Peter Pan, Harry Potter, “Beam me Up Scottie” and the magical flying carpet. However, in 2007 two theoretical physicists at St. Andrews University in Scotland announced a major breakthrough which “elevated levitation from being pure science fiction to science fact.” The scientists, Professor Ulf Leonhardt and Dr. Thomas Philbin, were able to reverse the so-called “Casimir Force” which causes objects to stick together “so that it repels instead of attracts.” The Casimir Force is a subject of quantum mechanics (in the world of atoms and

subatomic particles) where there exists a kind of fluctuation of an ever present energy field—in the minute empty spaces between objects. One reporter cites as an example the ““dry glue” effect that enables a gecko to walk across a ceiling.”

History is about chronicling civilizations’ progress. As history unfolds science more often than not helps explain and often compliments religion. For example, the discovery of DNA in the 1960s has accelerated our understanding of genetics by isolating and clarifying the existence of hereditary anomalies. There is little doubt that as scientists continue to investigate and unravel the mysteries of the Casmir Force, they will discover similar isolated anomalies which will help explain the supernatural and mystical levitations of St. Joseph of Cupertino—the patron saint of flyers.

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