

The Famous Quote That Da Vinci Never Said

by Dave English

“Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.”

This Leonardo da Vinci quote is everywhere — aviation books, magazines, websites, Instagram posts, coffee mugs, tee shirts, several science textbooks and some Smithsonian publications. It’s been repeated by the *Washington Post* newspaper, the Italian ambassador to the United States, and an executive director of The Leonardo museum. I saw it last year in big painted letters on the wall of a California flight school. It’s timeless emotion from a renaissance master of art and science. A flying quotation from maybe the most diversely talented genius ever to have lived, penned 400 years before the Wright Brothers flew. It’s evocatively magical and achingly relatable.

Yet Leonardo da Vinci never said it; and it’s nowhere close to 500 years old.

Yep, it’s fakey fake! Like, totally busted. Now, it’s still a great line. Maybe the best encapsulation of what pilots feel like when we’re stuck on the ground. As I write this during the coronavirus lockdown my eyes are turned skyward, longing to return. But how did this distinctive line come to be credited to the famous Italian polymath with a fascination for flight? And who actually did write it?

I started questioning the quotation’s authenticity over twenty years ago, while trying to nail down the details for a book I was editing. It was slow sledding. Several big aviation books had the line, but none of them cited a reference. None. I soon noticed it never has a date or even a year ascribed to it. This was back when university library catalogs were giant physical card files, Google didn’t exist, and you dialed into the internet on Netscape.

Since I don’t speak Italian, flipping through photos of Leonardo’s original notes didn’t get me anywhere. Reading English translations of his words didn’t uncover the phrase. Leonardo didn’t write books as such, but rather had observational and inspirational notebooks that he wrote in mirror-image cursive with shorthand codes and extensive

sketches. There are in total about 13,000 of these pages, originally loose papers of different types and sizes.



Leonardo wrote about birds and flying, but not that famous quote.

Leonardo certainly was obsessed with birds and flying machines, drawing and writing a lot about them over his entire lifetime. He believed a bird flew into his crib as a baby. He swam underwater to study how fish fins worked compared to bird wings. His aerodynamic ideas foreshadow Newton, Galileo, and Bernoulli. He was the first to draw flow fields. Charles Elachi, director of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, says Leonardo was "the ultimate genius," and that "as scientists and explorers we always looked to him as the model."

One of his famous notebooks, the *Codex on the Flight of Birds*, is devoted entirely to flight. It was written at the same time (1505-1506) he was painting the Mona Lisa. It contains aerodynamic understandings not equalled for hundreds of years. Elachi believes this codex is "probably the most important document about flight" on Earth. In 2012, a scanned copy of it flew much further, landing on Mars attached to the *Curiosity* rover. While close inspection of the *Codex on the Flight of Birds* reveals it was written over old notes, and contains a grocery list as well as other personal notes, our famous line is not there.

Peter Jakab, a curator at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, says Leonardo wrote 35,000 words and drew 500 sketches on flying. His last notebook, *Manuscript E* (circa 1515), has advanced studies of gliding flight and clearly shows how migrating birds use the wind for long range soaring. By then I think Leonardo had given up on mechanical human-powered flight, after a lifetime of never actually making it into the air in any machine. This disconnect from actually “tasting flight” is part of the magic of the quote, that the great master could voice our primal aerial passion before anybody could have experienced it. The general acceptance seems to be that the extraordinary intellect that envisioned so many mechanical possibilities, and could paint so many human emotions, conjured in his mind what flight would feel like, what lingering sweet taste it would leave in our psyche.

The search was frustrating. What if the quote was never in his notebooks? Maybe he wrote it in a letter to someone else? Or maybe was it a bad translation? Or an extrapolation? Or a misunderstanding? But surely not, as the line was quoted so definitively, so often. The only variations seem to be at the start. Sometimes it's, “For once you have tasted...” other times it's, “When once you have tasted...” The body of the quotation is remarkably consistent for something supposedly 500 years old, originally written in Italian or Leonardo's poor Latin.

I found nothing. Neither did some nice folks I talked with at *National Geographic* magazine years ago, who had contacted one of the world's leading Leonardo authorities in Italy as part of a long research project, and were told flat out that he did not write it. They were quite confident it was folklore fiction, and privately they sounded a little smug that a Smithsonian publication had recently printed it. I believed them, but how do you prove a negative? And who originally did pen the line?

The question quietly bugged me for years. The 2007 book *Leonardo on Flight* by Domenico Laurenza never mentions the line. A whole chapter of the 2008 book *Leonardo's Legacy* by science writer Stefan Klein is devoted to da Vinci's dream of mechanical flight, yet it also never mentions the line. Rather, the book concludes “after thirty years of tireless work, Leonardo's dream of flying had reverted to what it was in the first days of his research—a flight of the imagination.” And the amazing 2017 biography *Leonardo da Vinci* by Walter Isaacson, drawing on the latest research, didn't include it anywhere in its over 600 pages. So every time I saw the quote on a tee shirt or Twitter it was a poke to a bit of my brain that knew something wasn't right, that something was unfinished.

Well, finally the mystery has been solved, thanks to several patient detectives connected via the internet, using the vast search tools of Google Books and other electronic storehouses. People reached out to book authors and asked where ideas and narrative came from, while others sat through dreadful old copies of films. It all came together in the nerdy discussion page of the Wikiquote entry for Leonardo de Vinci, and now we can reveal the author was... drum roll please...

John Hermes Secondari. An American TV writer. In 1965.



John Secondari discussing rockets with Wernher von Braun.

It seemed all a bit underwhelming. A TV writer? But a little more research finds a pretty cool cat. He commanded a tank company in combat during World War II. He wrote romantic novels. An uncredited Frank Sinatra sang “his” song that won an Oscar. The *New York Times* called Secondari “a dominant figure in the field of the television documentary” in their February 1975 obituary. He had won three Peabody Awards and more than 20 Emmys during a career making quality documentaries. And while John was mostly found behind the camera, there’s pictures of him from a 1958 Walt Disney Television show—smoking a cigarette and discussing rocketry with Wernher von Braun. And he had deep ties to Italy.

Born in Rome in 1919, at five years old Secondari sailed with his mother to Ellis Island for a life in the United States. After getting a masters degree in journalism from

Columbia University, he worked as a correspondent for The United Press and CBS News. In 1941 he joined the Army and saw combat in Europe. After the war he rejoined CBS and was head of their Rome bureau. John also wrote several novels. The first one published drew on his knowledge and love of Rome with a title referencing the famous Trevi fountain—*Coins in the Fountain*. The book was turned into the 1954 movie *Three Coins in the Fountain*. It won two Oscars: best cinematography and best song. The eponymous song was sung by Frank Sinatra.

At the start of the 1960s Secondari organized ABC-TV's first documentary unit and went on to produce over 80 documentaries, covering serious subjects with award-winning substance. The Museum of Broadcast Communications' *Encyclopedia of Television* (2nd edition, 2013) says Secondari "forged a coherent house style that featured a heavy emphasis on visualization and dramatic voiceover narration." One of his projects was a series called *The Saga of Western Man*, highlighting key historical events that drove civilization forward. It was nominated for five Primetime Emmy awards. *The New York Times* said that to make the past come alive Secondari used "sound effects and animated the screen by treating the camera lens as if it were the eye of an actual witness to the event—scanning, zooming or resting on shadows, furniture, silhouettes, ships and other objects. As much as possible he restricted the acting to off-screen voices, using historically authentic dialogue."

One of the episodes of *The Saga of Western Man* was "I, Leonardo Da Vinci." The credits state it was written, produced and narrated by John H. Secondari, with "the voice of Leonardo da Vinci" played by Fredric March. Its copyright date is 1965 and it was released in 1966 by American Broadcasting. At 16 minutes and 21 seconds into the second reel, after the off-screen Leonardo narration urges people to build his flying machines, claiming after any crash "the hurts will be slight," over gentle visuals of a wheat field panning up into a clear blue sky, the voice says:



And once you have tasted flight you will walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you would return.

That's it. The first recorded version of what became the quote. There is nothing similar in any of the millions of pre-1965 documents digitized by Google or other archivers. It was written by John H. Secondari, channeling the real ideas and passions of Leonardo as part of a TV documentary. This was a serious project, with Professor Carlo Pedretti of the University of California as the consultant historian, but it did present conjectural concentrations of Leonardo's ideas. Condensing 13,000 pages of notes into a one hour show is hard. Clearly it's a great line, compelling, ethereal—even if it's closer in time to Leonardo DiCaprio than Leonardo da Vinci.

As an additional fact check, I talked with Marissa De Simone Day, Director of Exhibits and Learning at The Leonardo Museum of Creativity and Innovation in Salt Lake City, Utah. She was part of the creation of their outstanding Flight exhibit. If anyone should know about the line, it's her. She stated, "as far as we know, the quote originated in the script of an educational film by John Secondari which is titled I, Leonardo da Vinci. The script is inspired by Leonardo's notes in his codexes and narrated as though by Leonardo."

This spoken line is not exactly as we've seen it repeated time after time over the last few decades. It lacks the "forever" and the ending is missing the "always long." Those parts came to be added in pieces later. The first time the line appeared in print was ten years later, in the May 1975 edition of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* magazine. It was quoted as a Leonardo epigraph in *The Storms of Windhaven*, a science fiction story by George R. R. Martin (yes, that's Mr. Game of Thrones) and Lisa Tuttle:

For once you have tasted flight you will walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward; for there you have been, and there you long to return.

Now we have the "long to return." But where did they get the line? A fantastical lost da Vinci codex discovered in George R. R. Martin's attic? A personal letter from Leonardo delivered through a vortex time portal? Sadly not. Seems the communication was more down to Earth. According to Lisa Tuttle it was the editor of *Analog*, Ben Bova, who suggested it. An email to Ben revealed that he heard it in a documentary about Leonardo.

It was perfect for the start of a story of human space voyagers who crash-landed on a planet and constructed mechanically simple gliding machines from their wrecked spaceship. The presented-as-historical-fact quotation was read and spread by late seventies hang glider pilots and sky divers. Five years later, a newspaper story in the *The Herald Statesman* had the compelling headline Hang Glider Died "With His Eyes Turned Skyward." By the 1980s the power of the line had caught the imagination of the wider aviation world. And then it started being repeated in books and magazines.

Which is when I first saw it. I joined the echoing chorus by adding it to my lists of aviation quotes. Now it's almost everywhere. It's easy to understand why. The line perfectly describes a human emotion about our favorite obsession. It sounds just like what we think Leonardo sounded like. And fact checking the line used to be nearly impossible. But now we have better tools. It might take a while for the quote's attribution to be changed, considering how common it's become. I heard it as part of a theme park ride. It even made it to page 135 of the 2008 National Geographic book *Leonardo's Universe: The Renaissance World of Leonardo Da Vinci*. Emails to the authors were unanswered.

It's my speculation that the enigmatic Mona Lisa smile is Leonardo's reaction to his most famous flying quote turning out to have been penned by a ghostwriter centuries after his death. The great man did enjoy funny prophecy-riddles. His quote that "winged creatures will support people with their feathers" actually refers not to flying machines, but rather "the feathers used to stuff mattresses." His line "feathers shall raise men even as they do birds, towards heaven" is finished by "that is by letters written with their quills."

While we have to let his most repeated quote go, thankfully there are many well researched, 100% authentic quotations that match his amazing aerodynamic sketches. Like this one from the *Codex Atlanticus*:

A bird is an instrument working according to mathematical law, and it is in the capacity of man to reproduce such an instrument. A man with wings large enough and duly attached might learn to overcome the resistance of the air and raise himself upon it.