

FLYING BABIES



Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

One of the principal endeavors of editors who write Welcome columns is to propose new metaphors. We in the Linux business always need metaphors for the Open Source movement. Unfortunately, the problem with metaphors for Open Source is that it is very difficult to capture the moral aspect of the movement and simultaneously underscore the charm and anarchy of it all.

I've been thinking recently that a new original metaphor is long overdue. It is rare that I feel like one of those troubled writers in the film noir movies, angrily pulling blank sheets of paper out of a typewriter and desparately crumbling them. To escape my despair, I traveled to a splendid Baroque church in rural Bavaria, where I made the acquaintance of the most exquisite flying babies.

I am as religious as anyone – probably more religious than many in high tech – but honestly, it has always seemed that the excessive iconography of the Baroque era calls out for reinterpretation. But back to the babies (who are actually probably cherubim if you want to get technical). The statues stand about 2 feet in height. Their task is to hover around important objects in the church and to string their golden garlands among the other statues. You may be familiar with the fresco form of these babies, which inhabits the ceilings of 18th Century palaces, or the oil form, which appears generously in the works of Flemish masters such as Rubens. In this church, the babies are not paintings at all but are instead real 3-dimensional statues in white marble.

The babies hover excitedly, appearing very animated and engaged in their world. Each baby has an assignment, such as blowing a trumpet or carrying something. Sometimes they work alone, and sometimes they work together, cooperatively stringing their garlands. No baby is particularly interested in personal glory or enrichment. It is as if they have all just found some small way to pitch in with the whole collective effort.

Contrast this with the other statues nearby – very large statues of self absorbed old men with long beards. The old men monopolize the attention of the crowds, their faces bent in deep contemplation of their own piety. Each old man clutches a single object, as if it were his only possession, and appears ready to defend

that object with supreme urgency, but other than this obsession, the old men are not much interested in anything going on around them.

The old men do not have the power of flight that the babies have. They seemed destined to stand upon their pedestals forever. Even if one of them wanted to move, it is unclear where he would go, other than to fall off his pedestal with his arms clutched around his object. A team of babies could easily wrap their golden garlands all around one of the old men if they wanted to, and the old man wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Yet the babies do not bother with such things, for their interest is in the harmony of the complete interior space, rather than in individual vendettas or obsessions.

Still, it appears that a disagreement could easily develop, if a baby blew a trumpet too loudly or flew too close to an old man's object. And that is perhaps the only area in which the advantage goes to the old men, because they look very authoritative and important, and it would be easy for them to convince an unschooled onlooker that they knew what they were doing. If the authorities were called to settle a dispute, the imposing appearance of the old men would make them quite credible with a jury. And they could easily convince the unfamiliar by saying something like, "Who are you going to believe...me or this baby?"

Anyway, it was a very nice visit to the church, but I still haven't found my metaphor. I guess I'll keep looking...

Joe

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