Levitation Revisited

Elizabeth Tucker

One intriguing but understudied form of children's folklore is levitation, a ritual in which several preadolescents or adolescents lift a friend with only a few fingers of each hand. Sometimes the individual who gets lifted lies on the floor; other times he or she stands or sits in a chair. Records and studies since the seventeenth century have identified this process as a "spell," an "inchantment," a "curiosity," a "game," a "trick," a "procedure," or an "activity."[1] In my 1984 study of children's levitation and trance sessions, I suggest, using Mary Douglas's definition of ritual as symbolic action, "The presence of certain symbolic elements [in levitation], over a wide span of time and space, creates a sense of ritualistic potency" (1973,126). Revisiting the subject of my earlier study, I find that further investigation of levitation's history enhances our understanding of its meaning. Both solemn and playful, patterned and open-ended, levitation rituals teach us important lessons about children's, adolescents', and adults' behavior and needs.

Levitation rituals range from relatively simple lifting exercises to combinations of lifting with chants and storytelling about death and resurrection. Children's resurrection games have been documented but not studied in depth by folklorists. It seems necessary to make these games part of the lineage of levitation rituals and to identify some small but interesting parallels between these rituals and medieval mystery plays. William Wells Newell, author of *Games and Songs of American Children,* originally published in 1883, notes that some children's game-rhymes reflect "deeply mediaeval religious conceptions" (1963, 5). While we cannot know how children learned about levitation over a long period of time, we have enough information to make some educated guesses about the ritual's development since the Middle Ages. More importantly, we can ask why this ritual has been so exciting and meaningful for children in different parts of the world for longer than three centuries.

Before turning to examples of levitation rituals, we should briefly examine their structure. In her study "'Mary Whales, I Believe in You': Myth and Ritual Subdued" (1978), Janet Langlois examines relationships between myth and ritual and between legend and game. As the central character of a legend about a car accident, Mary Whales (known to other groups of children as Bloody Mary) behaves passively; she gets killed and scratched and then, as a ghost, disappears. Langlois argues, "The ritual Mary Whales … appears in the mirror through the actions of the game players, who know the circumstances of her death previous to their interaction with her" (8-9). When summoned in a mirror, Mary Whales becomes active, scratching the faces of children who, also behaving actively, dare to summon her (9). Similarly, levitation often follows legend-telling about a young person's death; some stories describe a murder committed by the young person who is about to be lifted, while others describe the young person's own death (Tucker 1977, 412; Freed 1994, 36). Within the fictive frame of legend-telling, the liftee is either active (a murderer) or passive (a murder victim). During the ritual

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 47

11/6/08 11:46:10 AM

itself, distinctions between active and passive roles fit a consistent pattern. Those who lift take an active role. Eager to achieve something amazing, they hope to exercise a mysterious power. The liftee, on the other hand, plays a passive role. Lying on the ground or sitting in a chair, she or he waits to be raised by helpful friends. The lifters' and liftee's goals complement each other. If all goes well, one person will feel the excitement of rising, while the others will enjoy the satisfaction of having made that rising possible. Later in this essay I will examine metaphors associated with raising and rising, which deserve careful consideration.

The first mention of a levitation ritual, practiced by four French girls, appears in an entry in the *Diary of Samuel Pepys* in 1665. Pepys does not use the term "levitation"; instead, he identifies what he learned from his friend John Brisbane as one of a number of "inchantments and spells" (Latham and Matthews 1972, 177). Iona and Peter Opie refer to Pepys's description in their *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, commenting that they themselves practiced the levitation "trick" with friends at school (1959, 309-10). Mary and Herbert Knapp describe both the "procedure" of levitation and the related phenomenon of trance, which involves rubbing a child's temples while telling a scary story, in *One Potato, Two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children* (1976, 252). My 1984 essay about levitation and trance sessions, based on fieldwork with children in Indiana and interviews with college students in New York, suggests that levitation and trance sessions represent an important aspect of young people's development. Usually occurring in private spaces and in girls' groups, these rituals help children set limits "upon worrisome developmental horrors that they all share" (133).

Shaari Freed's essay "Spooky Activities and Group Loyalty" (1994) concurs with the conclusions of my essay and introduces other insights related to both levitation and Ouija board play. Referring to five stages of children's growth in interpersonal awareness introduced by psychologists Robert L. Selman, Dan Jaquette, and Debra Redman Lavin (1977), Freed notes that children in the third stage of development, between the ages of seven and fourteen, engage in "intimate-mutual sharing" that builds group loyalty (36). She suggests that "the state of arousal involved in these rituals needs to be more carefully examined" and that "children, as well as adults, seek out arousal" (38-39). In this analysis, the term "arousal" means excitement or pleasurable stimulation. I agree that we should carefully consider why children enjoy performing levitation rituals and that we should remember that children are not the only seekers of this kind of thrill.

Besides occurring during sleepovers and camping trips, levitation takes place on school playgrounds, during gym classes, and during youth group meetings. Both boys and girls practice levitation, and adults sometimes lead the ritual. Adults' participation in levitation reminds us that play appeals to adults as well as young people. Brian Sutton-Smith's "paradigm of the Playful Person" fits this situation very well (1994, 20-21). Many folklorists of childhood, including myself, have tended to view the "childhood underground" as child-to-child communication with little adult involvement, but adults' participation tends to be important. If an adult friend of Samuel Pepys had not watched four little girls lifting a boy in Bordeaux, we would have had no seventeenth-century record of this fascinating form of children's folklore.

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 48 11/6/08 11:46:11 AM

Girls, Boys, and Adults

When I started collecting descriptions of levitation as part of my dissertation research in 1976, I was not surprised to find that these accounts came from girls. My own childhood introduction to this ritual took place in an all-girl group of sixth-graders in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1960. Before I went to my first slumber party — an eagerly anticipated event — another girl who was planning to go to the party had told me it might be possible to lift someone "like magic," with several girls lifting a friend using only two fingers of each hand. At the slumber party, we tried to lift our friend Valerie in this exciting way. Nothing amazing happened; we could not get Valerie off the ground. I vividly remember, however, how hard we tried to lift Valerie and how intriguing the whole process seemed. Our slumber party games and rituals took place late at night, free from parents' prying eyes. Sixteen years later, armed with folkloristic theory and a copy of the Opies' *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, I looked for rituals similar to the ones I had learned and read.

If I had had a chance to talk with Bill Ellis in 1976, I would have learned that an all-boy group was experimenting with levitation two years after I discovered it myself. In June of 2007, knowing that I was trying to learn more about levitation, Ellis kindly sent me this e-mail:

> I don't know a reference for this, but I know that on the playground in Portsmouth, Ohio, ca. 1962, when I saw this done, the pressing on the head was certainly a part of the ritual. As I recall, two "lifters" took the two fingers (forefingers IIRC) and simultaneously pressed down on the levitated person's forehead, then immediately put these fingers under the back and upper leg of the person and lifted up. The person did indeed come right up with no apparent effort. All the participants and spectators were male 7th graders. I don't recall any rhyme or narration of spooky stories. It was one of those things, like "knocking yourself out" by hyperventilating that went the rounds of preadolescent kids like wildfire, then next week was gone.

Ellis aptly identifies the transience of such preadolescent pursuits. Both he and I briefly tried to levitate our friends in single-sex groups, then moved on to other amusements. Unlike my girlfriends, who chose a place and time conducive to secrecy, his group performed the levitation ritual outside in a playground supervised by adults. The fact that they did this outdoors proves the Opies' point that levitation is a "curiosity" that excites wonder but does not always require seclusion (1959, 309).

A year ago I learned about another context for levitation from a cousin of mine who lives in rural Maine.[2] As a teenager during the late 1950s, my cousin Martha learned levitation from the adult leader of her Presbyterian youth group. She recalls:

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 49 11/6/08 11:46:11 AM

> I think we all had the "lifters" put their hands on the subject's head and press down for a few seconds, then say "five" and then do the two-finger lift trick and the subject becomes light and lifts very easily.

Martha's focus on numbers — two fingers, "say 'five'" — typifies the exactitude of this ritual. For the ritual to succeed, participants must use the right number of fingers (usually two) and follow any other numerical prescription that has become traditional in their peer group.

Another former member of Martha's youth group, Bob, offered a slightly different formula for levitation's success:

> Seems to me four people put their hands alternately on a person sitting in a straight chair and pressed down for say 20 seconds. Then those four removed their hands and each put their two fore-fingers together. Two of the four put their forefingers under the sitting person's knees and the other two put their forefingers under the sitter's armpits — then lifted — oh I forgot — all four attempted the lift BEFORE pressing down on the sitter's head and could not lift that person.[3]

Bob's version of the youth group ritual resembles Martha's in its reliance on the number two and its multiple, four. It differs significantly from Martha's, though, because it introduces an element of magic (cause leading to effect beyond rational rules). Examination of available source material helps to explain how adults' and children's interest in magic adds to levitation's meaning.

Magic

Since our earliest information about levitation comes from Samuel Pepys, who calls it a "spell" or "inchantment," we should consider the contents of early books of spells. One especially popular spell book, the *Petit Albert*, known in Latin as *Alberti Parvi Lucii Libellus de Mirabilibus Naturae Acarnis*, circulated in Europe in written and printed versions. There is some debate about the time that the *Petit Albert* originated; the version that I found is *Secrets Merveilleux de la Magic Naturelle et Cabalistique du Petit Albert* (1776). This book's introduction mentions science, magic, ancient Hebrew sages, and diabolism. In its "love spell" section are directions for helping a young girl or widow see the man she will marry: put a little tree branch under the pillow, then rub the girl's or woman's temples with a little blood from a bird called *huppe*. At bedtime, the girl or woman should say what she wants to see; that night she will see her future husband (25). Rubbing the head to produce a new state of mind in which a vision appears seems similar to pressing the head to make lifting possible. The French spell, however, only addresses a vision or state of mind. To learn about lifting the body, we must turn to later source material.

Information about levitation's history can be found in Sir David Brewster's *Letters on Natural Magic Addressed to Sir Walter Scott* (1843). The tenth letter in this book addresses the "remarkable power of lifting heavy persons when the

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 50 11/6/08 11:46:11 AM

lungs are inflated." Brewster includes this experiment among a number of others practiced by Samson, a traveling performer from Germany. During the nineteenth century, such demonstrations of amazing capabilities were popular in England. Brewster states, "One of the most remarkable and inexplicable experiments relative to the strength of the human frame is "that in which a heavy man is raised with the greatest facility, when he is lifted up the instant that his own lungs and those of the persons who raise him are inflated with air" (232). Note the emphasis on a mysterious element that is hard to explain: simultaneous inflation of all participants' lungs with air.

This mysterious inflation of lungs resembles the emphasis on careful head-pressing that dominates the descriptions I collected from youth group members in rural Maine. Both head-pressing and lung-inflating seem crucial for the rituals' success. Beyond rational explanations, magic seems to account for what happens. As in the Maine youth group's recollections, the numbers two and four figure prominently in how the nineteenth-century British ritual works. There are exactly four lifters, and lifting takes place at the intake of the second breath. Also noteworthy is Brewster's choice of words to describe what happens when the liftee rises up: "To his own surprise and that of his bearers, he rises with the greatest facility, as if he were no heavier than a feather" (1843, 233). This description documents use of the currently popular phrase "light as a feather," which may have accompanied earlier levitation demonstrations.

Demonstrators of this experiment traveled around Europe toward the middle of the nineteenth century. Brewster explains that lifting heavy persons in this fashion had first occurred in England a few years before under the direction of "Major H.," who had seen the experiment performed "at a large party at Venice under the direction of an officer of the American navy" (1843, 232). This traveling military officer had a major impact (pardon the pun) on people's familiarity with the lifting ritual, and other adult travelers almost certainly did so as well.

One reason for the fast-growing popularity of lifting rituals in the mid-nineteenth century was the growth of spiritualism in the United States and Europe. The spiritualist movement began in the United States with the well- publicized rappings experienced by Kate and Margaret Fox in the 1840s. As news of the Fox sisters and other apparent mediums spread, people became increasingly eager to witness marvels. Besides quasi-magical lifting of heavy people, raising and turning of tables became exciting events for groups of people to watch. Not everyone who observed such demonstrations believed in what seemed to be happening, but spiritualism's emphasis on occult powers encouraged suspension of disbelief.

How did "levitation" became a well known word in England? The *Oxford English* Dictionary, which defines one form of levitation as "the action or process of rising, or raising (a body) from the ground by 'spiritualistic' means," lists an 1874 quotation from George Eliot as its earliest literary evidence of this term's use. Eliot's *Legend of Jubal* includes the lines "On all points he adopts the latest views;/ Takes for the key of universal Mind/ The 'levitation' of stout gentlemen" (1874, 191). Eliot's focus on lifting overweight gentlemen suggests that she has seen or at least read about the kind of experiment that Sir David Brewster describes. Samuel Pepys's diary also emphasizes the marvelousness of lifting someone heavy,

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 51 11/6/08 11:46:11 AM

describing four little French girls lifting "the cook of the house, a very lusty fellow, as Sir G. Carteret's Cooke, who is very big" (Latham and Matthews 1972, 178). The mysteriousness of successfully lifting a heavy person seems to explain much of levitation's appeal from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

Late nineteenth-century magicians also helped to make "levitation" a household word. The well-known British magician John Nevil Maskelyne (1829-1917) introduced levitation as an on-stage performance and perfected his levitation methods over a period of almost thirty years. In his most elaborate performance, "The Entranced Fakir," which took place in 1901, Maskelyne passed a metal hoop around the body of a white-bearded fakir who floated high above his own sarcophagus. According to Jim Steinmeyer, author of *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear* (2003), this performance surprised and confounded proud third- and fourth-generation magicians (165). Spectators with no experience in illusionists' techniques were deeply impressed by this polished demonstration of levitation, which seemed both convincing and difficult to disprove.

Children watched magicians' performances, and it was common for magicians to invite children from their audiences to come up on stage to examine floating performers. The famous American illusionist Howard Thurston, who was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1869, invited a little boy to make cards on a deck rise by pulling his father's hair; on another occasion, he asked a little boy to touch a golden ring on the finger of a beautiful princess who seemed to be floating above the stage (Steinmeyer 2003, 14-15). Children who participated in such exciting performances probably told their friends all about what happened; some of these children probably imitated the magician's actions too. It seems likely that magicians' levitation performances influenced children's play in this way, and it is also likely that the term "levitation" entered the childhood underground partly because of magicians' influence.

Resurrection

There is, however, more to levitation than secular magic. The earliest record of the ritual in Samuel Pepys's diary includes a chant in French:

> Voicy un Corps mort
> Royde comme un Baston
> Froid comme Marbre
> Leger comme un Esprit,
> Levons te au nom de Jesus Christ (Latham and Matthews 1972, 177).

My translation follows:

> Here is a dead body
> Stiff as a stick
> Cold as marble
> Light as a spirit,
> We raise you in the name of Jesus Christ.

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 52 11/6/08 11:46:12 AM

It must have been poignant for Samuel Pepys to hear this chant on July 31, 1665, when the Great Plague was sweeping through London. Three centuries earlier, in the mid-1300s, 24 million people had died of the plague in France, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia. According to Frederick Cartwright, author of *Disease and History* (1972), "In southern France mortality was so great that the Pope consecrated the river Rhone at Avignon, so that corpses flung into the river might be considered to have received Christian burial" (37). Did this terrible epidemic become part of children's play and games between the thirteenth and the seventeenth century? We do not know; however, it seems certain that the enormous number of deaths frightened children and increased their awareness of the thin line between life and death.[4]

Death, burial, resurrection, and other serious subjects have emerged in European children's play and games over a relatively long period of time. In their study of "Pretending Games," Iona and Peter Opie note that children in sixteenth-century Holland imitated weddings, christenings, and religious processions; similarly, in eighteenth-century France, children imitated clerics' processions, soldiers' marches, and other kinds of movement (1969, 330-31). Other twentieth-century folklorists have documented interesting games in which a child plays the part of a dead person. Leea Virtanen's *Children's Lore* (1978) includes an account of Finnish children's imitation of the dead and of priests who bless them. Virtanen quotes from the recollections of a girl who grew up in a rural environment:

> We often played this game; I was dead and was in a coffin, which we made out of chairs laid flat and covered with newspaper. This boy, my only playmate, was always the priest. He blessed me and sang a hymn (88).

This rather sad and quiet game reflects children's interest in what happens to people's bodies after death but lacks the excitement offered by hiding and chasing games. Norman Douglas, author of *London Street Games* (1931), describes the game Dead Man's Rise, also known as Dead Man's Dark Scenery or Coat, in which one child hides, covered with other players' coats. When the other players call "Dead Man Rise," the child who has been hiding starts to run after the others. The last player that he finds becomes "it" for the next round of the game (5, 60). A similar game played outdoors is "Green Man Rise-O, a very old game" according to Douglas (59). One of Douglas's young informants explains this game's rules as follows:

> The way we play the game of greenman one of us lay down and cover his self with grass and the others run out and hide then they say greenman greenman rise up then he gets up and trys to catch them and the last one thats cort goes it [sic] (59).

Whether or not the hider goes by the name of "dead man," games of this kind demonstrate an interest in transition from death to life.

Mary and Herbert Knapp describe the game Pray for the Dead in their book *One Potato, Two Potato* (1976). They explain that in this game, played in the fall, one child buries him- or herself in leaves. Others kneel next to this child's "grave"

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 53 11/6/08 11:46:12 AM

and chant, “Pray for the dead and the dead will pray for you.” After a period of chanting, “The buried child slowly stirs, then suddenly explodes from the leaves. The others run away screaming. Whoever the ghost catches is It next time” (252). There is a difference between the outcome of Dead Man’s Rise and that of Green Man Rise-O: instead of rising from the dead, the deceased person becomes a frightening ghost that will relentlessly pursue other children. This emphasis on ghosts fits the fall season, during which, especially on Halloween, ghosts supposedly walk among living people.

Since imitative play and games involving death and resurrection have been popular in relatively recent times, it seems worthwhile to investigate possible antecedents. The prominence of the Christian religion in medieval Europe made liturgical dramas focal points of community life. Early in the thirteenth century, a papal edict forbade priests to act in such dramas, giving rise to miracle plays about lives of the saints and then mystery plays based on Bible stories. According to Peter Happé, author of *English Mystery Plays* (1975), “Around the betrayal of Christ, his Death and Resurrection are centred the essential truths of Christianity” (24). Both Jesus’s own resurrection and his resurrection of his friend Lazarus are climactic events of mystery plays written in England in the fourteen and fifteenth centuries. Four mystery play cycles have survived the ravages of the intervening years: the cycles of York, Towneley, Chester, and Ludus Coventriae. Performed on the feast of Corpus Christi, mystery plays served the dual purpose of instruction and worship (Happé 1975, 11).

Given the small number of mystery play manuscripts and the lack of a time machine to travel back to the Middle Ages and investigate how children responded to the plays, I cannot prove that young people’s play was influenced by performances of Christ’s and Lazarus’s resurrections. I do, however, believe that children in England, France, and other European countries where mystery play performances occurred would have enjoyed scenes in which someone who appeared to be dead rose from the grave. We know that children watched these performances, since mystery plays involved the whole community. In England, guild members performed mystery play scenes on wagons that they rolled from one place to another. Medievalist Pamela M. King explains that the York cycle in the 1460s and 1470s “was made up of forty-seven pageants, performed on wagons which stopped in sequence at each of twelve stations around the city, with around 14,000 lines of spoken dialogue, and involving a huge cast of characters, including twenty-four men capable of taking on the role of the adult Christ” (2006, 7). Such exciting, mobile performances would have gotten children’s attention and provided an intriguing model for imitation.

There is a small but interesting linguistic similarity between the chant in Pepys’s diary and some of the lines in the Towneley cycle of mystery plays, written in 1450. In “Lazarus” from Towneley manuscript 31, Maria [Mary Magdalene] tells Jesus, “Lorde, mekill sorrow may men se/ Of my sister here an me//We are heavy as any lede,/ For our broder that thus is dede” (Happé 1975, 402). Similarly, in “The Resurrection” from Towneley manuscript 26, Maria expresses joy at Christ’s rising through proverbial comparison: “I am as light as leyfe on tre,/For ioyfull sight that I can se,/For well I wote that it was he,/ My Lord Ihesu/He that

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 54 11/6/08 11:46:12 AM

betrayed that fre,/Sore may he rew" (Happé 1975, 100). Perhaps emphasis on such comparisons in mystery plays encouraged children to create similar lines when enacting resurrection scenes. On the other hand, lines such as "Stiff as a stick/Cold as marble/Light as a spirit" and "Light as a feather, stiff as a board" may simply reflect well-known proverbial comparisons in French and English.

It is also interesting to note that both medieval English mystery plays and relatively recent levitation rituals focus on determining whether the person who will rise up is actually dead. In "Lazarus" of the Towneley manuscript, Jesus talks with his disciple Peter about their friend Lazarus. Peter suggests that Lazarus needs his sleep, but Jesus replies, 'I say you sekerly he is dede" (Happé 1975, 401). Similarly, in the play "Christ's Appearance to the Disciples" from the Ludus Coventriae manuscript 38, the disciple Thomas (generally known as "doubting Thomas" to Christians) insists upon touching Christ's wounds to make sure that Christ has truly triumphed over death. Thomas states, "I xal never be-leve that he is qwyk and sownde/In trewth whyl I knowe that he was dede on rood" (Happé 1975, 41). Once he sees and touches Jesus, Thomas proclaims in Latin, "*Quod mortuus et sepultus nunc resurrexit*" (Happé 1975, 42).

Recent examples of children's levitation rituals similarly focus on whether or not someone has died. Simon J. Bronner includes an example collected from a 29-year-old female college student in 1987, in *American Children's Folklore* (1988). This student remembered using the following words as a prelude to levitation between sixth and eighth grade:

> I think he's dead
> I know he's dead
> He feels dead
> He looks dead
> He looks dead
> He looks dead
> He is dead (167).

Note that the word "dead" appears in each line, driving home the point that the chant explores various modes of perceiving the end of life. I collected variants of this chant in New York while doing the research for my 1984 essay on girls' levitation at slumber parties. In Indiana eight years earlier, I had heard other descriptions with a similar emphasis. In 1976, ten-year-old Betsy explained that "somebody makes up a real spooky story and says that you're dead, and then you say, 'Okay, now that you're dead let's rise you from the grave,' and it feels like you're floating when they lift you up" (Tucker 1977, 412). In that description and in others, the word "dead" signals the start of levitation.

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 55 11/6/08 11:46:12 AM

Marvels and Metaphors

Levitation rituals offer young people a mysterious process that might (or might not) rely on magic. When it works, levitation seems marvelous and wonderful. In my 1984 essay I concluded that the act of lifting mattered more than symbolically bringing a dead person back to life: "If the attempt *worked*, [the girls] were happy, and that was the main thing" (130). My recent research supports that viewpoint. Kids want levitation to work and feel thrilled when it does.

In *Haunting Experiences,* Diane E. Goldstein suggests that testing supernatural evidence follows a pattern similar to application of the scientific method. Goldstein notes that "the spontaneous telling of a personal supernatural experience runs counter to one of the central principles of academic rationalist traditions — that supernatural belief would decline as education and technology increased" (2007, 60). In our current era, information science and technology have become prominent in people's everyday lives. Rather than spurning the supernatural, however, many young people embrace it, seeking amazing experiences. This process begins in preadolescence and may continues into young and older adulthood.

To understand this process better, I talked with adolescents and spent time surfing the World Wide Web, watching movies, and reading summaries of episodes of certain television shows. Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was sufficient to talk with young people and watch them demonstrate what they knew. Now, in our complex cyberworld, we need to consider mass-cultural influences. In his recent essay "Seuss on the Loose: Children's Folklore on the Internet," C.W. Sullivan III reminds us that "children have ready access to the internet in ways that they do not have access to textbooks and folklore collections" (2006-2007, 36). Children's and adolescents' use of electronic media provides one of the most intriguing areas of study that folklorists can pursue today.

First, however, I talked with a group of young people with whom I met regularly. In the spring of 2007 I asked my 52 Introduction to Folklore students, most of whom were freshmen and sophomores, what they knew about levitation. All of the young women in the class knew about this ritual, and many of them had tried it. Five of the young men had not heard about levitation before; the others had either tried it or heard about it. The usual age for this ritual, my students said, was 10-13. Among the places where they had tried it were houses, playgrounds, gyms, and camps. All of the students called the ritual "Light as a Feather." Eight out of ten small discussion groups cited sleepovers as the main setting. Seven groups mentioned chanting; one mentioned storytelling. All of the students who had tried levitation remembered how important it was for the ritual to succeed. Four of them admitted that they had tried levitation as college students, but most of the others viewed the ritual as "kid stuff."

When I went online in the fall of 2007, I discovered that the interactive video website YouTube offers a plethora of videos in which kids chant "Light as a feather" before trying to lift each other. Recently, in July of 2008, YouTube listed 478 videos under the keywords "light as a feather." Not all of these are about levitation; some are music videos, including the Lunachicks' punk rock song "Light

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 56 11/6/08 11:46:13 AM

as a Feather," Chick Corea's jazz piece by the same name, and Bob Marley's "Misty Morning." Many "Light as a Feather" videos on YouTube seem to have been filmed by teenagers who live in the United States, England, and the Caribbean. Among the settings for these videos are basements and living rooms of private homes, camps, schools, and playgrounds: very similar to the range of spaces that my college students described. In all the videos that I have viewed, the words "light as a feather, stiff as a board" comprise the only verbal part of the ritual. As might be expected in a medium that features films, action (in this case, lifting) seems very important. Some commentators on videos mention storytelling, but they do not give storytelling much attention.

It can be difficult to figure out the names, ages, and geographical areas of people who post videos on YouTube. Fortunately, the maker of one of the most popular "Light as a Feather" videos, which had been viewed 28,217 times by July 27, 2008, lists plenty of identifying information. Trace, aged 17, is a student at Del Norte High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her video shows four teenagers chanting "light as a feather, stiff as a board" before raising a friend in a hooded sweatshirt up into the air. After the boy rises, a shocking image of the face of a monster with filmy white eyes appears on the screen.

This monster's sudden appearance brings to mind metaphors associated with the word "raising." Parents want to raise their children well: to "bring them up" from childhood to adulthood with success and pride. The parents' role is active, while the children's role is passive. During the process of child-raising, which strives toward an upward progression in maturity, parents may chide their children for causing trouble. Children may "raise a ruckus," a phrase which suggests bringing something disruptive up from lower regions. Some teenagers have prided themselves on "raising hell": doing something so disturbing that it makes people think of the devil's domain. Most serious-sounding of all, the phrase "raising the devil" suggests demonic consequences for causing a disturbance or playing around with supernatural forces. In *Raising the Devil* (2000), Bill Ellis cites Christian minister Maxwell Whyte's conclusion that demons do the lifting in levitation (54). Concern about punishment for chanting and summoning occult forces is certainly part of levitation's mystique, although most of the young people with whom I have spoken have not seemed concerned about adverse consequences.

In fact, most "Light as a Feather" videos on YouTube seem playful and light-hearted. In many of these videos, kids laugh and joke. Some videographers enjoy poking fun at each other, as in the video that begins with the description "Cody, lameass. Everyone in biology used ONLY 2 fingers from each hand to lift him." Several teens explain that they filmed "Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board" because they felt bored (pun intended?) at home or at school. Comments on many of the videos include accounts of similar experiences, disputes about rules, and debates on diamagnetism and other scientific or pseudo-scientific explanations for the ritual's success. Researchers who have the time and patience to sift through these reams of comments and view all the videos can get a great deal of information about this kind of interaction among young people.

Other relevant information comes from movies and television shows. Before the late 1980s, as far as I know, kids did not learn about levitation through movies

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 57 11/6/08 11:46:13 AM

or TV. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the TV shows *Captain Planet*, *As Told by Ginger*, *The Girls Next Door*, and *South Park* have all had episodes in which levitation takes place. The 1987 movie *The Gate* includes a levitation scene; since the gate in question is a backyard gate to hell, the ritual's context suggests dangerous possibilities. Also threatening and mysterious are the circumstances that surround four young witches in the 1996 film *The Craft,* who perform acts of magic to torment fellow students at high school. In one of this movie's most exciting scenes, Sarah, Nancy, and Bonnie make Rochelle rise into the air by chanting "Light as a feather, stiff as a board." Bonnie's mother, worrying about what the girls are doing behind Bonnie's closed bedroom door, shouts "Are you getting high?" This line makes viewers laugh, because one of the girls *is* floating high above the floor.

This movie's exploitation of the double meaning of rising up high foregrounds the significance of altered states of consciousness. When I started revisiting the material I had collected before writing my 1984 essay, I noticed that the word "high" came up often. Deanne, for example, a ten-year-old girl in Indiana, had told me, "Well, you lay down, and you get real real real high, and you play that, uh, they step over you, make you real high, and say like if you wanta be a feather, they tell a story what you do, and everything" (Tucker 1977, 411). In my 1984 essay, I noted, in a tentative way, that this emphasis on "getting high" sounded like taking drugs (126). Now I see a clear relationship between levitation and mind-expanding experiences favored by teenagers. In *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults* (2001), Bill Ellis observes that adolescents' supernatural experiences during legend trips resemble recreational drug use "in that both are 'trips' — deliberate escapes into altered states of being where conventional laws do not operate" (189). While preadolescents' and young teenagers' levitation experiments tend to be short, safe, and simple, they represent an early step toward new and exciting states of mind.

Amazing and delighting children, adolescents, and some adults, levitation rituals draw people together so that they can experiment with supernatural experiences. Since participants can choose to lift or to be lifted, either action or passivity is a socially acceptable option. When the ritual succeeds, levitation results in positive feelings. The lifters feel powerful, and the liftee feels "high." Beneath the surface of this brief ritual lie serious questions about the borderline between life and death, which is explored in stories about murder that precede the ritual. Metaphoric implications of the words "raising," "rising," and "high" enrich our understanding of participants' hopes and fears. As YouTube and other electronic sites continue to attract young video-makers, it will be fascinating to see how levitation performances develop in the future.

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 58 11/6/08 11:46:13 AM

NOTES

I want to thank Janet Langlois and C.W. Sullivan III for their helpful comments.

1. The terms "spell" and "inchantment" appear in the diary of Samuel Pepys; "trick" and "curiosity" appear in the Opies' *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Mary and Herbert Knapp call levitation a "procedure" in their *One Potato, Two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children*, and Simon J. Bronner calls it an "activity" in his *American Children's Folklore*. Bill Ellis uses the term "game" in *Raising the Devil*.

2. My cousin Martha, a resident of southern Maine, kindly provided me with this information on June 20, 2007.

3. Bob, also a resident of Maine, sent this information on June 20, 2007.

4. A recent study of children's play in response to traumatic events is Ann Richman Beresin's "Children's Expressive Culture in Light of September 11, 2001 (2002). While there are no records of children's responses to the tragic loss of so many people during the plague's passage through Europe, we should note Sylvia Ann Grider's point that "images of burials of corpses wrapped in winding sheets" were familiar to young survivors of the plague and that the contemporary image of a ghost in a white sheet may have originated during the plague years (114). In *Once Upon a Virus* (2004), Diane E. Goldstein describes a Canadian child in the midst of a game of tag saying "Tag, you've got AIDS" (1). This description, as well as the line "Barney died from HIV" in children's song parodies of the early 1990s, shows how easily children's concerns about epidemics become part of their games and songs.

WORKS CITED

Albert, Petit. 1776. *Secrets Merveilleux de la Magie Naturelle et Cabalistique*. Lyons: Héritiers de Beringo Fratres.

Beresin, Ann Richman. 2002. Children's Expressive Culture in Light of September 11, 2001. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 33:3: 331-37.

Brewster, Sir David, Walter Scott, and J.A. Smith. 1843. *Letters on Natural Magic Addressed to Sir Walter Scott*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

Bronner, Simon J. 1988. *American Children's Folklore*. Little Rock: August House.

Cartwright, Frederick F., and Michael D. Biddiss. 1972. *Disease and History*. New York: Dorset Press.

Douglas, Mary. 1973. *Natural Symbols*. New York: Vintage Books.

Douglas, Norman. 1931. *London Street Games*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Eliot, George. 1874. *The Legend of Jubal, and Other Poems*. Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood.

Ellis, Bill. 2000. *Raising the Devil*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

______. *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live*. 2001. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

______. 2007. E-mail communication. 8 June.

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 59 11/6/08 11:46:13 AM

Freed, Shaari. 1994. Spooky Activities and Group Loyalty. *Children's Folklore Review* 17(1): 33-39.
Goldstein, Diane E. 2004. *Once Upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
______. 2007. Scientific Rationalism and Supernatural Experience Narratives. In *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, ed. Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas, 60-80. Logan: Utah State University Press.
Grider, Sylvia Ann. 2007. Children's Ghost Stories. In *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, ed. Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas, 111-42. Logan: Utah State University Press.
Happé, Peter. 1975. *English Mystery Plays*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.
King, Pamela M. 2006. *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City*. Cambridge, England: D.S. Brewer.
Knapp, Mary and Herbert. 1976. *One Potato, Two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children*. New York: Norton.
Langlois, Janet. 1978. "Mary Whales, I Believe in You": Myth and Ritual Subdued. *Indiana Folklore* 11(1):5-33.
Latham, Robert and William Matthews, eds. 1972. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. 6. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
Newell, William Wells. 1963. *Games and Songs of American Children*. New York: Dover.
Opie, Iona and Peter Opie. 1959. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. New York: Oxford University Press.
______. 1969. *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Selman, Robert L., Dan Jaquette, and Debra Redman Lavin. 1977. Interpersonal Awareness in Children: Toward an Integration of Developmental and Clinical Child Psychology. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 47: 264-74.
Steinmeyer, Jim. 2003. *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear*. New York: Carroll and Graf.
Sullivan III, C.W. 2006-2007. Seuss on the Loose: Children's Folklore on the Internet. *Children's Folklore Review* 29:33-38.
Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1994. Paradigms of Intervention. In *Play and Intervention*, ed. Joop Hellendoorn, Rimmert van der Kooij, and Brian Sutton-Smith, 3-22. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Tucker, Elizabeth. 1977. Tradition and Creativity in the Storytelling of Pre-Adolescent Girls. PhD diss., Indiana Univ.
______. 1984. Levitation and Trance Sessions at Preadolescent Girls' Slumber Parties. In *The Masks of Play*, ed. Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne, 125-33. New York: Leisure Press.
Virtanen, Leea. 1978. *Children's Lore*. Helsinki: Suomalisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

CFR_2006-07_R3.indb 60 11/6/08 11:46:14 AM