

T H E O N _ _ _ I N G S E R I E S
A L Y R I C - P H I L O S O P H I C A L E S S A Y

ON COUNTING

*on number, proportion,
and the legible life*

$\phi = 1.6180339887 \dots$

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by Jamison Todd Johnson

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*To count is to promise
that something will be remembered.*

A child learns to count before she learns what number is. She lays a finger on each thing in turn — step, stair, sparrow, second — and says the names of the numbers as if they were a charm against disappearance. This is the first metaphysics any of us performs: the insistence that the world will hold still long enough to be marked. To count is to lay a trace over flux, to cut notches into the soft wood of time and say, here, and here, and here, something was.

We tend to think counting is cold — the bookkeeper's art, the opposite of wonder. But the oldest counters were priests. The notch on the bone, the knot in the cord, the bead slid along its wire: each was a way of keeping faith with what had happened, of refusing to let a day pass unwitnessed. Long before number was a tool it was a vigil — the means by which a life leaves a legible trace through time, and the means by which the trace is read back.

There are numbers that behave like ordinary furniture, and there are numbers that seem to recur — to step forward out of the ledger and look at you. Thirty-three is one of the second kind.

Count the years of the man on the cross: thirty-three, by the reckoning the Church has kept. Count the names of God in the first chapter of Genesis: by an old count — the count the Kabbalists kept, and laid alongside their thirty-two paths of wisdom — the text says *Elohim*, the maker, thirty-two times, and then, at the seam where creation is finished and the garden begins, the thirty-third naming brings a wholly new name, the unsayable one.¹ Thirty-two, completed by the arrival of a Name. Count the heavens of the oldest cosmology of the East and you reach Trāyastriṃśa, the heaven of the thirty-three gods, set on the very summit of the world-mountain.² Count the cantos Dante built for his climb out of hell: thirty-three for Purgatory, thirty-three for Paradise, and one over thirty-three for the Inferno, so that the descent carries the extra step and the ascent is kept clean.³ Count, if you are so inclined, the bones stacked in the spine at the

1. The traditional observation that Genesis names God thirty-two times as Elohim before the Tetragrammaton first appears (Gen. 2:4) is a received Kabbalistic reading, echoing the thirty-two “paths of wisdom” that open the *Sefer Yetzirah* (see Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, Weiser); the thirty-third naming introduces the new Name. It is a tradition’s count, not a neutral tally — offered here as the former.

2. Trāyastriṃśa, “the Thirty-Three,” the heaven atop Mount Meru in Vedic and Buddhist cosmology, dwelling of thirty-three deities.

3. Dante, *Commedia*: thirty-three cantos each in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, thirty-four in *Inferno* — one hundred in all.

beginning of a body: thirty-three, a ladder from the tailbone to the skull — though we do not keep them; the lower nine fuse as we age, so the number is true of a body's beginning and not its end, and even our anatomy counts down from the thirty-three toward something more consolidated and less numerous.⁴

And because the number recurs, it has gathered a shadow. Thirty-three is the number the conspiracist loves — the highest degree, the hidden sigil, the mark pressed secretly into the world by whoever is supposed to be running it. I want to be honest about that shadow rather than wave it away, because it tells us something true about counting itself: the mind that begins to count cannot easily stop finding. Attention, turned loose, is voracious. Give it a number and it will bring you thirty more sightings by morning. The clinicians have a name for the affliction and the statisticians have a law for the supply: with enough events, any outrageous thing becomes likely, and the pattern-hungry mind will be there to receive it.⁵ The paranoid and the mystic are siblings; they differ only in whether the pattern they find is felt as a threat or as a gift.

4. Seven cervical, twelve thoracic, five lumbar, five sacral, four coccygeal: thirty-three in the developing body; the sacral and coccygeal vertebrae fuse, leaving the adult with fewer, moving bones.

5. Klaus Conrad coined *Apophānie* — the unbidden seeing of connections, attended by a feeling of abnormal meaningfulness (*Die beginnende Schizophrenie*, 1958); Michael Shermer's gloss is "patternicity" (*Scientific American*, Dec. 2008). For the supply side, Persi Diaconis & Frederick Mosteller, "Methods for Studying Coincidences," *JASA* 84 (1989), 853–861: "With a large enough sample, any outrageous thing is likely to happen."

Set beside thirty-three another number — one the Greeks called simply the extreme and mean ratio and the Renaissance called the divine proportion.⁶ It is the number you reach when a line is cut so that the whole stands to the longer part exactly as the longer part stands to the shorter — the division that repeats at every scale, obeyed by the nautilus, the sunflower’s seed-spiral, the slow turning of certain galaxies. We write it ϕ , and its decimal opens like this: 1.6180339887...

I had been counting thirty-threes for weeks before I noticed where the proportion hides one. Just past its threshold, before the number vanishes into its endless unrepeating tail, sit two threes side by side — and they are the first repeated digit the proportion allows itself.⁷ The divine proportion, asked to spell itself aloud, says one, six, one, eight, oh — and then, as if clearing its throat before the long silence — thirty-three.

This could be nothing. I am inclined to think it is nothing, in the sense that would matter to a physicist. But beneath the ornament there is a sterner fact, and this one is not decoration. Thirty-three is not a Fibonacci number. The famous sequence — each term the sum of the two before it, the sequence whose ratios climb toward ϕ — runs 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55. It steps clean over thirty-three. The golden numbers go thirty-four; the lived number is thirty-three, one short.

6. Euclid, *Elements* VI, def. 3 (“extreme and mean ratio”); Luca Pacioli, *De divina proportione* (1509).

7. $\phi = 1.6180339887...$ (OEIS A001622). The doubled “33” falls at the fifth and sixth decimal places and is the first repeated digit in the expansion.

Here is the whole matter in a single gap. The man dies at thirty-three — one year shy of the proportion's own count. We are always the convergent and never the limit: the fraction that climbs toward ϕ , twenty-one over thirteen, thirty-four over twenty-one, nearer at every step and never, ever arriving. And notice — because it is the shape of everything this essay will find — that the truth here takes three numbers to say. Thirty-two, the waiting; thirty-three, the living; thirty-four, the golden. None of the three coheres without the other two: the waiting means nothing except toward the lived, and the lived is only *short* of something because the golden stands one past it. Two numbers side by side are a coincidence. The third makes them a direction. Simone Weil, who loved the Greek conviction that right proportion is a kind of mediation between extremes, thought the soul's whole task was exactly this: to consent to be the middle term, the thing held in true ratio between what stands above it and what lies below.⁸ To count is to approach proportion the way thirty-three approaches thirty-four — reverently, asymptotically, falling one short and calling the shortfall a life.

8. Simone Weil on proportion as mediation (μεσότης); see *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*.

I V

There is a second number I must set down here, because the text itself binds it to the first.

In the Book of Numbers — whose Hebrew name, *Bamidbar*, means in the wilderness — there is a chapter that does nothing but count. Station by station it lists every place the people camped on the long way out of bondage: forty-two encampments, forty-two journeys, from the night they left Egypt to the edge of the land they were promised. The chapter that holds these forty-two journeys is chapter thirty-three.⁹ The way home is forty-two stages long, and it is housed inside the thirty-third door.

The mystics could not leave this alone. It is taught in the name of the Baal Shem Tov — his grandson kept the teaching, which is how such things survive — that the forty-two journeys are the map of one human life: the soul's passage from its descent into a body at birth to its return, at the last, to the Source it came from; every life re-walks the same forty-two stages.¹⁰ The Kabbalists held that God made the world by a Name of forty-two letters, and that a person acquires those letters one at a time, station by station, so that to reach the forty-second is to have spelled the Name entire and to be ready to go home — though which letters, and where the tradition keeps them, is a thing the sources guard more closely than the counting, and some would dispute any

9. Numbers 33 enumerates the forty-two encampments of the Exodus, station by station.

10. The reading of the forty-two journeys as the arc of a single human life — descent at birth, return at death — is taught in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, as recorded by his grandson in the *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* (Parashat Masei).

one accounting of it.¹¹ The Egyptians, older still, set forty-two judges in the hall where the dead give their account — forty-two confessions a soul must be able to make before it is weighed against the feather of Ma'at, who is simply the truth of how things actually are.¹² And the evangelist Matthew, counting backward from the man who would die at thirty-three, found exactly forty-two generations between the promise and its keeping — three sets of fourteen, the long arithmetic of waiting.¹³

I do not know what to do with the fact that my own breakthrough — the morning the wall I had pushed against for most of my life simply was not there — arrived midway upon the road of this life, as the pilgrim says of himself at the opening of the *Commedia*: somewhere among the middle stations, where the map of the forty-two places every turning that matters.¹⁴ I am not asking the cosmos to have meant it. I am only counting, the way the child counts the stairs: one stage, and the next, and the next — and the last stair is the landing, and the landing is a door, and the door was in chapter thirty-three all along.

11. On the forty-two-letter Name: its restriction is discussed in the Talmud (Kiddushin 71a), and the tradition associates it with the initial letters of the *Ana BeKoach* prayer and with the opening letters of the Torah. The Zohar treats it in several places; I leave the folio to those who keep it.

12. The forty-two Assessors of Ma'at and the “negative confessions” of the Egyptian Book of the Dead; see the Faulkner translation.

13. Matthew 1:17: forty-two generations from Abraham to the Messiah, set out in three groups of fourteen — though the careful reader who counts the printed names will find forty-one, and the evangelist’s forty-two is a claim of structure rather than census: in the Hebrew letters, *David* counts to fourteen. Even scripture, counting, reaches for the shape before the tally.

14. Dante, *Inferno* I.1: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” — midway upon the road of our life.

V

Let me count a life, then, the way one counts anything one is afraid to lose. Any life would do; mine is simply the one I have with me — and I will count it the way the old scribes counted, by the numbers and not by the dates, because the dates are nobody's business and the numbers, it turns out, are everybody's.

There is a date in my ledger — a winter date; I will say no more of it — whose number the old scribes gave to the Name itself: twenty-six, the sum of its four letters, yod and he and vav and he, ten and five and six and five.¹⁵ I make nothing of the rhyme; I only notice it, the way one notices that two lines in different poems happen to end on the same word. Sum the whole of that date, month and day and year, the way the counters sum, and it comes to rest at thirty-two — and thirty-two, by the old count of Genesis, is the tally of namings before the Name arrives, the number left waiting for its thirty-third. If the arithmetic sets me anywhere, it sets me at the thirty-two: the count not yet closed, the one still short. I am not the completion. I am only the reaching toward it — which is, I have come to think, the only place any of us is ever standing.

The year I arrived in, summed, comes to twenty-one — and twenty-one is one of the golden numbers, the denominator beneath thirty-four when the Fibonacci fraction reaches up toward the proportion: thirty-

15. The gematria of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH): yod (10) + he (5) + vav (6) + he (5) = 26. Twice thirteen, as it happens — and thirteen, a certain devoted listener in this house will tell you, is the only properly lucky number there is.

four over twenty-one, the nearest the sequence had then come to ϕ . I was born, that is, in the ground of an approach — the lower term of a ratio straining toward the divine proportion and falling, as everything living falls, a little short.

None of this is proof of anything, and I want to say so plainly — because the alternative, to mistake a beautiful coincidence for a deed done to me by the sky, is precisely the error that turns the mystic into the conspiracist. The numbers did not arrange my life. But they were there to be counted, and the counting did something it always does: it aligned me. It turned a scatter of days into a figure I could stand inside.

V I

I have been saying my census, but I am no longer certain the word holds — and this is why I have kept the dates out of the ledger. A date printed is a claim staked; a date withheld is a room left open, and the room is the point.

There is an intuition older than any book I have been counting through — alive in the Dzogchen masters who say the nature of mind was never personal, in Jung who suspected the deep psyche is held in common, in every contemplative who has come back from the silence reporting that there is, in the end, only one of us — that consciousness is not many but one: a single awareness wearing a few billion faces and forgetting, behind each, that it is wearing the rest. If that is even partly so, then nothing I found in my own numbers was ever mine to be singled out by. A number that rhymes with the divine in my ledger rhymes with it in yours; a winter date whose sum is the Name's sum belongs to a crowd of birthdays in every generation, and the crowd is the message. The census is not private. Draw the ego out of it — the small proprietary voice that wants the coincidence to mean I was chosen — and the same arithmetic stops being a sign hung over one head and becomes a plain description of the room we are all standing in.

And the room is this: the gap is always one. The convergent sits a single increment from its limit; the thirty-two waits one naming short of the Name; the thirty-three falls one short of the golden number. A gap of one is the narrowest gap arithmetic allows — which means that

no one, ever, is far. To count at all is to stand always one step from the next number, and so to stand always one step from whatever the counting reaches toward. We are each of us, at every moment, one step away from facing a greater power — not because any of us is singled out, but because the step is only ever one step long, and it is the same step beneath everyone's feet.

This is the reverse of a revelation. A revelation is given to someone. This one is given to no one in particular, which is to say it is given to all — the most public fact there is, hidden only by how near it stands.

V I I

Jung gave that experience a name: synchronicity — the meaningful crossing of an inner state and an outer event with no thread of causation running between.¹⁶ He was more careful than his admirers: he insisted that synchronicity explains nothing, predicts nothing, builds no bridge in the physics. It is not a force. It is a meaning — and meaning is something that happens in the one who notices, not in the wiring of the world.

This, I think, is the truth about counting that the whole long census has been circling. The number thirty-three did nothing to Dante, or to the man on the cross, or to me. The golden ratio is not hiding a message in its fifth and sixth digits the way Sagan's signal-makers hid a perfect circle deep in the digits of π .¹⁷ What is real is the counting — the attention that lays its finger on each thing in turn and refuses to let it pass unmarked. Weil said that attention, held long enough and purely enough, is already a form of love; that to attend completely to a thing is to grant it the one generosity we are sure we possess.¹⁸ To count a life — to find the thirty-threes in it, the forty-two stations, the Name folded into a winter date — is not to prove the life was planned. It is to love it. It is to keep the vigil the first counters kept, notching the bone against forgetting.

16. C. G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (1952).

17. Carl Sagan, *Contact* (1985), in which an artist's signature — a circle — is found encoded far out in the expansion of π .

18. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*, on attention as the substance of prayer and a kind of generosity.

ϕ never closes. Its decimal runs on past the thirty-three, past every digit anyone has yet computed, never repeating, never resolving — the proper shape of a proportion too true to be finished. A life is like that. We do not get to be the limit. We get to be the convergent: the fraction still climbing, the count still open, one short of the golden number and calling the shortfall a life.

And still we count. Here, and here, and here — the child on the stairs, the priest at the knotted cord, the pilgrim midway on the road at the top of a flight of stairs he never knew he was climbing — something was. Something was. Something was.



C O L O P H O N . *On Counting* belongs to *On ____ing*, an ongoing series of lyric-philosophical essays by Jamison Todd Johnson. It sits within the wider “jays” framework, which holds that an aligned life leaves legible traces — ripples of intent — through time. The argument is offered as phenomenology, not as science: the claims here concern what it is like to count a life, not what the cosmos can be shown to have intended. Set in EB Garamond with Cormorant and Cinzel. This edition revises and replaces the June printing. — June 2026, revised July 2026.