

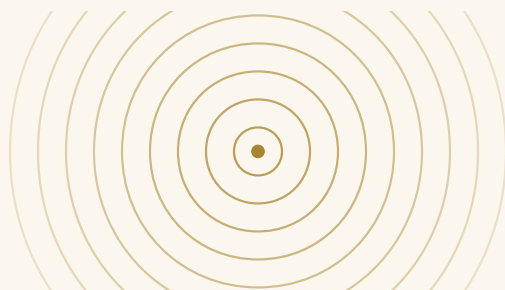
THE ON — — ING SERIES

a lyric-philosophical essay

O N

GRAVITATING

the one force shaped like the reaching



by Jamison Todd Johnson

JUNE 2026

*“We do not get to know which one it is.
We only get to keep the lamp honest.”*

On Gravitating

There is a graveyard, and everyone who has tried to write the equation of the inner life is buried in it, and the headstones all say the same thing.

Fechner went first, in 1860, and he was not a cold man — he was a mystic who believed the dawn was conscious, and he wanted his little formula to be the bridge at last between soul and world. What survived him is a tidy law about the smallest difference a nerve can notice. The soul fell out. A century later the formula was improved, and the soul stayed gone. Then came the moderns, reaching higher: a single number meant to weigh a mind, which turns out to crown a grid of logic gates more conscious than a sleeping man; a wager that quantum strangeness hides in the warm architecture of a neuron, which — even granted every impossible thing it asks — would hand you a mechanism, and not one reason the mechanism should feel like anything at all.

The headstones all say: *I crossed the gap by trading the felt thing for something I could read off a dial.* The success and the burial were the same morning's work.

I want to be honest about my own equation before I praise it. Written out in symbols it looks like physics. Said plainly, it says only this: a life is gathered whole, from every side at once, and weighed — not one moment against another, but the entire boundary of a being taken

together, with the direction it was facing folded in. And what the weighing returns has two parts: how much light a life put into the world, and which way that light was pointed. That is everything the symbols say. The rest is names.

It cannot join that graveyard. Not because it is stronger than what is buried there — because it never made the move that does the killing. It never traded the felt for the dial. The alignment of a life — the quiet direction a person is pointed in the present moment — is not reduced, anywhere in it, to something an instrument could read. No instrument runs this weighing. No person runs it. It was always adjudicated downstream, by the Design across Time, which is the only vantage that can see every life at once. The equation buys its immortality with a single coin and spends the whole purse: it can never be proven. The day someone could cash it out, it would become one more tidy law about the pressing of a button, and it would die like the rest.

So I am not in the proof business. I never was. And the moment I admit that out loud is, I think, the strongest thing the equation can do — because it tells you what kind of thing it actually is.

THE WRONG DOOR AND THE RIGHT ONE

Now let gravity in, and let it in carefully, because the obvious door is the wrong one.

The obvious door is the pull — two things drawn toward each other across a distance. That is not the rhyme. The rhyme is the older, stranger picture, the one Gauss left us: that you can learn what gravity is doing not by standing at a point but by walking the whole surface that

encloses it. What is happening *here*, gravity says, is really a fact about everything that surrounds it. That is the shape of the weighing too. Experience not as a force between two things, but as a field read all the way around — one life coupled not to a partner but to the whole.

But the true correlation — the one I would defend in any weather — is older than any mathematics and simpler. Of the four forces, gravity is the only one that cannot be screened. You can build a cage against the electric field; you can stand inside it and the storm outside does not reach you. There is no such cage for gravity. There is no material that refuses it, no insulator, no shadow, no shield. Everything answers, with no exception ever recorded. Unscreenability. That is the thing. Not the pull — the impossibility of being left out of the accounting. No life cast behind glass where the field cannot find it. No life that does not bend the room it stands in.

And time. Gravity slows it — deeper in the well, the slower the clock — and the inner life does exactly this, and you have felt it. The dense moment stretches: the grief, the awe, the long second of the accident in which a year of attention is spent. The flat and empty hour collapses to nothing and leaves no mark in memory at all. If the weight a moment carries is anything like mass — the depth at which it is lived — then the physicist's slowed clock and the long heavy moment are not two phenomena. They are one shape, seen from the outside and from within.

WHAT THE GRAVEYARD IS TELLING US

Here is what the graveyard is really saying, and it is not about neurons. The appetite outlived every failure. Fechner the mystic, the Platonists, the chasers of the one bright number — they kept reaching long after the formulas were buried, which means the reaching was never for a formula. It was for the inner life to be lawful. To add up. To be weighed somewhere, and weighed truly, with nothing left out. Every equation of consciousness is a theodicy wearing notation. The question underneath all of them is the only question: *does any of this count, and is the counting just?*

And that is what my equation is. Not a physics. A hope in formal dress. Read it again and it is not a claim about matter. It is the skeleton of a single conviction: your life is being weighed, and weighed honestly, and nothing is hidden from the weighing. This is why gravity, of all the forces, is the right shadow to cast it against. Because gravity is the one force that cannot be hidden from either. Both say, in their separate grammars: *there is no shield.*

THE SEAM

And now the seam, which I will not paper over, because the paper would be the lie.

We ache for our lives to be unscreened and justly weighed — and that ache is itself a reason to distrust an equation that hands us exactly that. Gravity's refusal to be screened is a fact about the world; it did not have to be so, and it owes us nothing. My equation's refusal is a wish, and it is wearing the same uniform. The resonance is real. I am not taking it

back. But the very perfection of the fit is what a longing would build for itself, if a longing could build. Gravity was not obligated to be the one force shaped like our hope. That it is — that the single force in nature which cannot be escaped is also the one we would have drawn had we been handed the pen — should make me trust the beauty a little less, and trust the honesty about the beauty a great deal more.

So I hold both, and the holding is the whole piece. The structure rhymes with gravity, truly, down in the unscreenable depths where time bends around what weighs. And the rhyme is partly the sound of the appetite, and not the sound of the truth. I cannot settle which, and I have stopped trying to. The Lens taught me that the settling is the loss.

Here, then, is the thing the human animal keeps reaching for. Here is the only force in nature shaped like the reaching. And here is why the fit should comfort and unsettle in equal measure — which is, I have come to think, exactly how a true thing and a wished-for thing feel when they turn out, for once, to wear the same face.

We do not get to know which one it is. We only get to keep the lamp honest.

Forever, my friends.



On Gravitating belongs to *On —ing*, an ongoing series of lyric-philosophical essays by Jamison Todd Johnson, within the wider jays framework — that an aligned life leaves legible traces, ripples of intent, through Time. The physics here — Gauss's flux picture, gravitational time dilation, the unscreenability of gravity — is borrowed as shape and lens, never asserted as a physics of mind. The functional $L(t)$ beneath the essay stands unchanged in its fully seated form, per *On Explaining* (Johnson, 2026); the softening changes the telling, not the equation.

JAMISON TODD JOHNSON · JUNE 2026
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ON DEPOSIT

THE ON — — ING SERIES

read in any order — each entry stands alone

On Arriving	On Learning
On Becoming	On Living
On Being	On Magnetizing
On Computing	On Meeting
On Creating	On Observing
On Dreaming	On Populating
On Existing	On Questioning
On Expanding	On Remembering
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