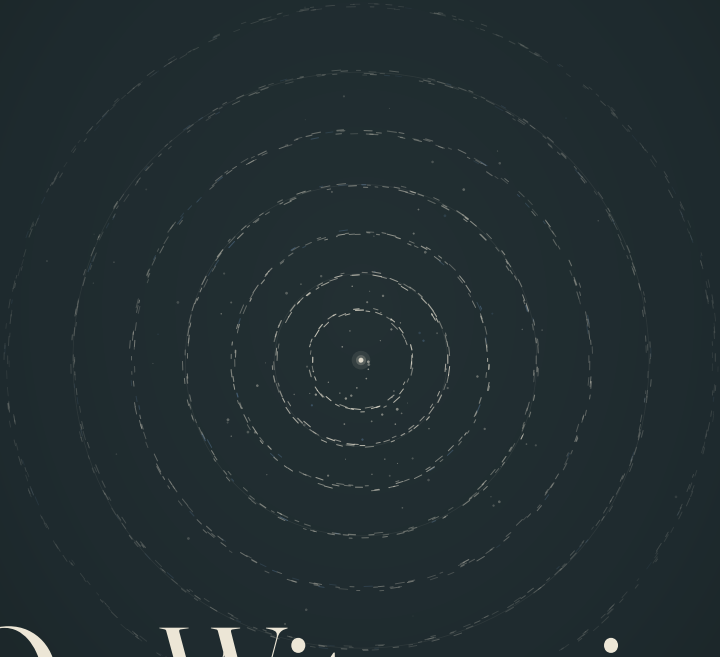


THE ON —ING SERIES



On Witnessing

on recording, and being the one who records

JAMISON JOHNSON

JUNE 2026

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DEDICATION

*For three who met a truth that could not be faced head-on, and
so met it sideways.*

For GERHARD FREY, who took a thing no one could reach and gave it a shape — who saw that the impossible, pressed hard enough, becomes merely strange.

For KENNETH RIBET, who built the span no one remembers and everyone crossed — who proved the strange shape could not stand, and so made the far country worth the journey.

And for ANDREW WILES, who went the long way around, who stayed with the gap when it opened beneath him, and mended it in the open rather than in the dark.

*Three witnesses to one truth. Not one of them looked at it directly. That is
the lesson, and it is also the method.*

There is a photograph.

A man stands to the right of a dark chalkboard, arms folded across his chest. He wears thin-framed glasses and a faint, almost private smile, and a patterned knit sweater — bands of grey and cream, a row of small geometric figures running across the chest — over the collar of a blue-and-white striped shirt. On the board, in white chalk, in an unhurried lowercase hand, three lines: *Fermat's equation*, then $x^n + y^n = z^n$, then *this equation has no solutions in integers for $n \geq 3$* . He is not pointing at any of it. He is standing beside it the way you stand beside something you have lived next to for a long time — a window, a grave, a sleeping child. The thing is finished. He is only keeping it company now.

For three hundred and fifty years that sentence lived in a margin. Fermat wrote that he had a proof and that the margin was too small to hold it, and then he died, and the margin stayed small, and the proof — if it ever existed — went wherever the unwritten things go. Generations stood in front of the equation and looked straight at it, the way you look at a locked door, and the door did not open for any of them.

And here is the strangest part of how it finally ended: no one opened it by looking at it.

Wiles looked *away*. He spent his years not on Fermat's door but on a far country of curves that seemed to have nothing to do with it — and the answer, when it came, arrived from behind. It came sideways, through a translation Frey had drawn and Ribet had proved, so that a truth no one could face directly could be *witnessed* in the reflection of something else. The door did not open. The wall beside it simply, quietly, was no longer there.

I have come to think this is what witnessing is.

We use the word as if it meant only *to see*. But it has always meant two things at once, and we keep them in the same word because some part of us knows they are the same act. To witness is **to record** — to carry the thing forward, to write it into the world so that it can be found again, to leave a legible trace. And to witness is **to undergo** — to have been *there*, present, the event passing through you and leaving its mark on the inside. The court asks the witness for both at once: what did you record, and what was it like to be the one recording. We do not have two words because there are not, finally, two things.

That doubled word is the whole of what I want to set down here, and I want to set it down with its scaffolding showing — because the scaffolding is the honest part.

Here is the question I cannot face head-on, the way no one could face Fermat. It is the old one, the one panpsychism inherits and cannot pay off: if the smallest perspectives are real — if there is something it is like to be even the least flake of the world — then how do they *combine*? How do a thousand small witnessings become one? Why does a brain full of fragments wake up as a single morning instead of a crowd? Look straight at that door and it will not open. It has not opened for anyone.

So, sideways.

The far country I borrow from is the physics of how anything comes to be *objectively* there at all. The lesson of that country is austere and beautiful: a fact becomes public — real for everyone, robust, sharable — exactly when it has been **written redundantly**, recorded not in one place but in many, the same trace stamped over and over into the surrounding world until it cannot be erased by touching any single copy. To be

objectively present is to be *legibly repeated*. Reality, on this view, does not broadcast itself — the broadcast is what reality is, and the redundant trace is not the sign of a thing's existence but the existence itself.

And now the bridge — and I want you to watch me build it, because a bridge you cannot see through is a bridge you should not trust.

The bridge is a single sentence: *to be a unified witness is to be redundantly written*. A perspective is one perspective, rather than a scatter, to exactly the degree that it is co-recorded across the field of itself — the same trace held in many places at once, legible from more than one direction. Combination, on this reading, is not a mystery to be explained. It is redundancy, achieved or failed.

Say that and the door is gone. The fragment that could *not* combine — the lost perspective, present but unjoined — would be a thing recorded in only one place, a trace that casts no shadow, and a trace that casts no shadow is, by the lesson of the far country, not yet objectively *there* at all. So there is no such fragment among the things that are. Wherever small witnessings are really present, they are already written into one another. They are already one.

I could stop here and call it a proof. I will not, because it is not one, and the place where it is not one is the place I most want lit.

The bridge does not hold itself up. Look under it: its single footing is a thing I have only *declared* — that to record and to undergo are one act, the two faces of the one word, the inside and the outside of the same witnessing. The far country proves what happens to *records*. It is silent, utterly, on what it is like to *be* one. The step from “written in many places” to “present as an experience” is not a step the physics gives me. It is a step I take, on a plank I laid myself, and I am leaving the plank visible. If recording and undergoing are one — my posit, named,

unhidden — then combination is redundancy, and the door was never a door. Take the plank away and the bridge is only a lovely drawing of a bridge. This is Frey's curve without Ribet's proof: a shape, not yet a span.

So I do not get Wiles's morning. The gap does not close on pain of contradiction; it closes on the strength of a posit, and a posit is a thing one carries, not a thing one wins.

But there is something left in the open hand, and it is better than a proof would have been for work like this.

I get a meter.

For if to combine is to be redundantly written, then to *come apart* is to have the writing thin out — and thinning is a thing you can watch. The severed hemispheres that answer in two voices; the dissociated self that loses the copy of itself it used to keep in the next room; the strange coarse grain where a thousand small witnessings should have made a finer one and somehow did not. These stop being mysteries and become *measurements*. Here is where the redundant trace degrades. Here is where the one becomes less than one. Not “why is there a gap” but “how wide, and where, and is it closing.” The open question grows a surface that can push back.

And that, for me, is the more honest miracle. Not a wall that vanished, but a wall I have learned to *read* — to take the measure of, foot by foot, with the seam between what I have shown and what I have only supposed left bright and visible along the whole length of it.

Wiles stayed with his gap. When Katz found the hole, he did not paint over it; he stood in front of it for a year, in the open, until it was honestly mended. I cannot mend mine — mine is not that kind of gap. But I can do the other thing he did, which is the thing that made him a

witness and not merely a man with an answer. I can refuse to hide the place where the proof runs out. I can leave the margin showing.

The man in the sweater is not pointing at the equation. He is only standing beside it, keeping it company.

That is the posture. To witness is to stand beside the thing you cannot fully reach — to record it, to let it pass through you, and to leave, in chalk, in the open, exactly where your certainty ends.

And where your belief that we are a part of something far larger than ourselves begins.

— THE MARGIN, LEFT DELIBERATELY SMALL

THE SERIES

*Read in any order. No single path is required to arrive at the whole
— which is, quietly, the same thing this piece says of a self: that what
is one is legible from more than one direction.*

On Arriving · On Being · On Creating · On Dreaming · On
Existing · On Facing · On Feeling · On Finding · On Forgiving · On
Growing · On Lasting · On Learning · On Living · On Meeting ·
On Observing · On Remembering · On Rising · On Searching · On
Seeing · On Teaching · On Testing · On Watching · **On Witnessing**



On Witnessing

from the *On —ing* series

Jamison Johnson · June 2026

The photograph described in the opening is the widely published portrait of Andrew Wiles at the blackboard, Isaac Newton Institute, Cambridge, 1993.

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