

An Interview With One of My Neurons

Documented by Ron Bonnstetter during those moments between waking and sleeping)

Ron: Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. Of the approximately 86 billion neurons in my brain, why did you volunteer to be interviewed?

Neuron: Volunteer may be too generous a word. You thought of the question, several million of us became involved, and somehow I ended up representing the group. That is usually how things work around here.

Ron: What is it like being one of my neurons?

Neuron: Busy. Very busy. You are not a quiet man neurologically. You are always wondering, examining, remembering, connecting, and asking, “What does this mean?” Even when you appear to be resting, some of us are sorting memories, strengthening useful connections, and trying to make sense of whatever you exposed us to that day.

You call it curiosity. We call it overtime.

Ron: Do you know that you are part of me?

Neuron: I do not know “Ron” in the way you know yourself. I have never seen your face, read your résumé, or held your book. I know only the signals that reach me and the cells with which I communicate.

But together, we know you.

No single one of us contains your childhood, your marriage, your scientific work, your disappointments, or your dreams. Those things exist in the relationships among us. You are not stored in one place. You emerge from the conversation.

Ron: I have begun to think of myself as your shepherd. Do you feel well shepherded?

Neuron: Most of the time.

You have fed us with a lifetime of questions. You have taken us into classrooms, laboratories, conversations, music, travel, love, conflict, and discovery. You have refused to let us remain unchanged. Every time you learn something, reconsider a belief, or see an old experience differently, you ask us to reorganize ourselves.

That can be demanding, but it is also what keeps a brain alive in the fullest sense.

Ron: Have I made mistakes in caring for you?

Neuron: Of course. Every shepherd occasionally leads the flock into rough terrain.

You have carried stress longer than was useful. You have sometimes rehearsed frustrations until we became very efficient at feeling them. You have occasionally sacrificed sleep because an idea seemed too important to leave until morning. And when someone questioned your work or violated your trust, you sometimes invited that person to continue living in here rent-free.

We noticed.

Ron: I am sorry.

Neuron: Do not waste energy on guilt. We are built to change. Give us different experiences, and we will begin building different pathways. That is one of the gifts we offer you: the past influences our wiring, but it does not have exclusive rights to our future.

Ron: What would you like more of?

Neuron: Sleep. Movement. Oxygen. Good nourishment. Laughter. Music. People who make you feel safe enough to remain curious. Problems worthy of your attention—but not so many that every moment becomes a problem to solve.

And wonder. We function especially well when you are in awe.

Ron: Why wonder?

Neuron: Because wonder opens doors. It interrupts certainty. It allows distant ideas to meet each other. Your best thinking often occurs when you stop trying to prove what you already know and become fascinated by what you do not understand.

That is when this entire community becomes most alive.

Ron: Do my thoughts affect you?

Neuron: Repeated thoughts become well-traveled roads. Each time you return to one, you make it easier to travel again.

If you repeatedly think, “I have been disrespected,” we strengthen that route.

If you repeatedly ask, “What can this teach me?” we strengthen another.

We do not decide which roads you travel most often. We simply become better at carrying you along the ones you choose.

That is why shepherding matters.

Ron: What have you learned from living with me?

Neuron: That identity is not a finished object. It is an ongoing pattern.

For years, you asked us to help you achieve, teach, research, explain, and lead. More recently, you have asked a different question: “What does it all mean?”

That question has changed the activity around here.

You are no longer merely collecting experiences. You are revisiting them, reorganizing them, and transforming them into stories that may help other people understand their own lives. We think this may be among your most important work.

Ron: Are you afraid of growing older?

Neuron: We are aware of change, but we do not spend much time fearing the calendar. We respond to conditions. Challenge us appropriately, nourish us, let us recover, and continue giving us meaningful work.

Do not confuse getting older with becoming finished.

A brain can continue making connections as long as life keeps offering something worth connecting.

Ron: After all these years, do you have one criticism of me as your shepherd?

Neuron: Yes. You sometimes forget that shepherding is not the same as controlling.

You cannot command every thought, preserve every memory, prevent every loss, or determine how long each of us will remain. Your responsibility is not to guarantee that nothing changes. Your responsibility is to create the best possible conditions for life—and then participate gratefully in what emerges.

Ron: And one final question: Who is carrying whom? Am I carrying 86 billion neurons, or are all of you carrying me?

Neuron: Both.

You carry us through the world. You decide where the body goes, what it encounters, what it practices, and what it values.

We carry your memories, your language, your questions, your love for Nicolette, your scientific curiosity, and the story you call your life.

You are our shepherd, Ron—but you are also our creation.

For this brief, remarkable time, you care for us, and together we become you.