

Shepherd of a Living Universe

by Ron Bonnstetter
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I recently encountered an idea that changed the way I think about myself: a neuron is not merely a microscopic wire carrying electrical signals. **It is a living cell**—an extraordinarily complex entity that senses its environment, communicates, consumes energy, maintains itself, adapts, and responds to what happens around it.

A neuron is not an independent organism in the same way an amoeba is. It cannot ordinarily survive apart from the body that sustains it. Yet, like an amoeba, it possesses many of the fundamental qualities of life. It has a membrane separating its inner world from its surroundings. It exchanges chemicals and electrical signals. It must be nourished. It can flourish, become stressed, change, deteriorate, and die.

That realization fills me with awe.

I carry within my brain approximately 86 billion neurons. Each one is alive. Each has its own structure, history, relationships, and role within an unimaginably intricate community. No single neuron contains a thought, a memory, a belief, or a dream. Yet together, through trillions of connections, they somehow create the experience I call “me.”

They remember my childhood. They recognize the face of someone I love. They allow me to hear music, feel gratitude, imagine possibilities, and revisit the moments that have defined my life. They help me ask questions about the universe—and, remarkably, they are also the living instruments through which the universe becomes aware of itself.

I once thought of my brain as something I owned, much as I own a heart, a hand, or a pair of eyes. Now I see it differently. I am not simply the owner of a brain. I am the temporary guardian of an immense living society.

I am its shepherd.

That word carries responsibility. A shepherd does not command life into existence; a shepherd protects, nourishes, guides, and creates the conditions in which life can thrive. My neurons depend upon the choices I make: how I sleep, what I eat, whether I move my body, how I manage stress, what I choose to learn, and whom I allow into my emotional world.

The thoughts I repeatedly entertain also shape this community. Attention strengthens some pathways while neglect allows others to fade. Experience leaves physical traces. Learning changes connections. Love, curiosity, fear, resentment, music, conversation, and wonder are not merely passing abstractions. Each becomes part of the biological environment in which my neurons live.

This gives new meaning to self-care. Caring for myself is not simply pursuing comfort or extending my life. It is an act of stewardship toward billions of living cells that have served me

faithfully from one moment to the next. They have carried every sorrow I have endured, every discovery I have made, and every person I have loved.

I find that both humbling and empowering.

Humbling, because the “I” I have defended so fiercely is not a single, isolated thing. I am an ecosystem, a collaboration, a living conversation of astonishing scale.

Empowering, because I am not helpless in that relationship. Although I cannot control every change within my brain, I can influence the conditions under which it lives. I can offer it rest instead of relentless strain, movement instead of stagnation, curiosity instead of withdrawal, connection instead of isolation, and purpose instead of mere repetition.

Perhaps this is one of the deepest responsibilities of being human: to care wisely for the life entrusted to us—including the life within us.

I carry approximately 86 billion neurons, but perhaps it is equally true that they carry me. They carry my memories, my identity, my unfinished questions, and my capacity to become someone new.

I am their shepherd, and they are the living constellation through which I experience the world.

Together, for this brief and extraordinary span of time, we become a person.