Guest Editor's Introduction

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Twenty years ago, I sat in my first, and really only, class on neuropsychology. Two weeks in and I was called to the front of the classroom to draw a picture of a neuron and label its parts. I remember forming the elegant and simple cell that is the cause of so much of who we are. First, I formed the soma with its starry shape, each point ending in a maze of dendrites. Next, came the axon, coated with the myelin sheath, leading to a gaggle of terminal buttons. These terminal buttons reach out to the dendrites of multiple neighboring neurons, with electric pulses jumping from cell to cell via a synaptic gap aided by neurotransmitters. Moreover, some neurons are thought to connect to as many as 200,000 others, while most connect to a mere thousand or so (Wellcome Trust, 2014). Given the sheer number of neurons in the brain, roughly 85 billion, this means that the possible number of synaptic connections in the human “connectome” numbers in the hundreds of trillions (Seigfried, 2014). The sheer beauty and complexity of the brain and its myriad connections should give us pause as we ponder and describe the human being that houses these connections.

We stand today, 15 years removed from the “Decade of the Brain” as declared by President George Bush, in midst of the BRAIN (Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies) initiative started by President Obama. After countless fMRIs (functional Magnetic Resonance Images), PET (Positron Emission Tomography) and CT (Computed Tomography) scans, and EEGs (Electroencephalograms) we know much about the inner workings of the brain. However, with every advancement we are reminded how little we know about the brain as well. Each year new studies probe and prod our imaginations about this organ.
that regulates our bodies, houses the mind, interprets the environment, creates meaning from our experiences (including how we interpret God and the world), and gives rise to some sense of self. Today, we look to those studying the brain to help us understand compassion and empathy, emotions and trauma, and even the origins and impact of religion; but, it may be that the most important claims made by those who study the brain have to do with conclusions about what it means to be human. It is out of these claims that this issue of Sacred Spaces takes shape.

The first thing you will notice about this issue is that it seems short on pastoral counseling practices. Despite 25 years of a concerted effort to explore the brain and its many functions, the exploration of the brain by theologians and pastoral counselors is still relatively new. I believe much of this reluctance to engage neuroscience research has to do with seeing a preponderance of reductionism in the conclusions of neuroscientists, as well as, the overall complexity of the subject. Our study of the neurosciences as theologians and pastoral counselors is nowhere near as broad or detailed as other subjects; yet, maybe it should be. Neuroscientists are making a variety of anthropological claims that impact how we understand the person that may be seeking our counsel. Many of their findings are shaping what we come to understand as best practices, and we are drawing numerous conclusion about human capabilities through the conclusions of their research. This conversation between the neurosciences and pastoral theology and counseling is long overdue, and I am thankful to the American Association of Pastoral Counselors and the Editorial Board of Sacred Spaces for the chance to explore this topic with you.

The articles curated for this issue are meant to provide a starting point for our exploration of the connection between the neurosciences and pastoral theology and counseling. They range from ideas about method to understandings of human beings using the neurosciences; we have Sacred Spaces: The E-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, 2015, vol.7
included articles that explore neuroplasticity, ritual, and concepts about human understanding and formation; finally, we have included articles that begin to tease out our understanding of how the neurosciences might influence who we are as therapists in the room with our clients. It is my firm belief that at the end of this issue you will have explored many of the broad and specific issues those of us writing in this area face when relating two seemingly disparate disciplines that seek the same goal, to understand what it means to be human.

Somewhere in those trillions upon trillions of neural connections who we understand ourselves to be arises; moreover, in this human connectome we develop a sense of what it means to be connected to the sacred, to the holy, to a sense of meaning that steps beyond that same sense of self. As pastoral theologians and counselors it is time to take our seat at the table and continue to tease out these connections and make sense of what we are beginning to understand about human beings, their brains, and our religious and sacred connections.

References