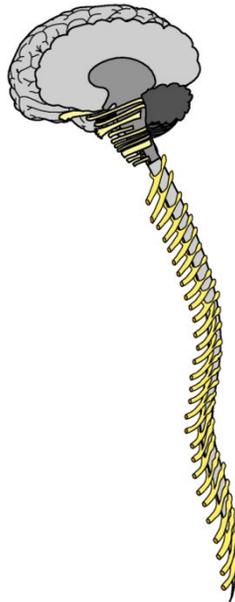


PARAPOWER: CONSCIOUS ACTIVATION OF THE PARASYMPATHETIC
by Celeste De Bease, Ph.D.

Every since I was a child, it's been hard for me to slow down. I gravitate towards doing things fast, multi-tasking, and project planning. Gradually, I became aware of the benefits of slowing down—I mean, really slowing down. My job title is medical psychologist. My work involves helping people access innate healing mechanisms, and the strongest mental medicine I've found has turned out to be something I call "parapower."

Parapower is the word I use for the amazing power that accompanies the deliberate activation of the parasympathetic nervous system. To help you understand it, I'll explain the basics of the human nervous system. (I promise it'll be brief and painless.) Then, I'm going to suggest something fairly radical; that the only way to become more spiritual is through activation of this system.

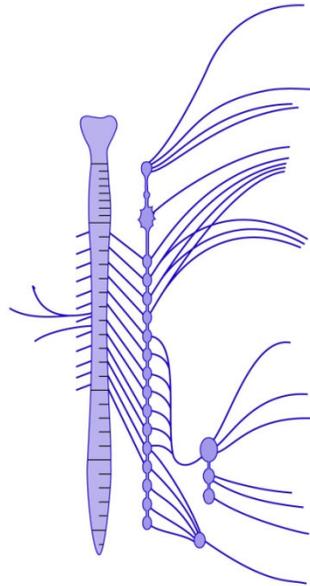
Many of you are familiar with aspects of the human nervous system. There's the central nervous system (CNS), so named because it lies in the center of our bodies and because it's our central command station. The CNS consists of the brain and the spinal column.



Then there's the peripheral nervous system (PNS) which is on the periphery of the central nervous system. The PNS is divided into the autonomic nervous system and the somatic nervous system. Since the parasympathetic system—the system we're most interested in—is connected to the autonomic system, we'll focus on the autonomic system.

The autonomic nervous system, which contains both the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems, was named by Dr. John Langley in the early 1900s because he thought it acted automatically, and functioned independently of the central nervous system, but today we know that the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system do a wondrous dance together. When "central command"

(the brain) picks up information about a potential threat to our well being, it sends a signal down the spinal column. The spinal column then relays the information to a chain of cells running alongside the column, and the sympathetic system becomes activated.



It directs your heart to beat faster, your lungs to gather more oxygen (you'll breath faster), and your adrenal gland to release adrenaline; you will be primed for a fight-or-flight action response. When the danger is gone, the parasympathetic system helps returns you to a state of relaxation and rest.

Our sympathetic systems are very well trained. For millennia, human beings faced a hostile, physically competitive environment. We were hunter-gathers and the average life span of humans throughout much of history was about thirty-five years. Life was often cut short by disease, by combat, or by some other animal who was also struggling to survive.

The sympathetic nervous system helped us survive. Rapid in its response, energizing and protective, the sympathetic nervous system has served us well. In fact, all of us who are alive today owe our existence to this system. We all have a great, great, great, (keep going) ancestor who ran faster or fought harder or stayed alert longer than most. Survival of the fittest dominated in the natural selection of our ancestors.

As a sympathetically enhanced animal, we guard our jugular veins with uplifted shoulders. We elongate our spines to give us a visual advantage in the meadow or a psychological advantage through body language. (Shoulder padding in business suites is still favored as a "body language" enhancer). We tighten muscles along our torsos to protect vital organs; creating a kind of coat of mail. We shut down all non-essential processes to maximize the energy available for survival. To help us in a fight, our hands are protected from bleeding excessively by vascular constriction (the well known "cold hands" of fear). To help us in flight, blood is withdrawn from our feet to keep them from bleeding excessively—this was

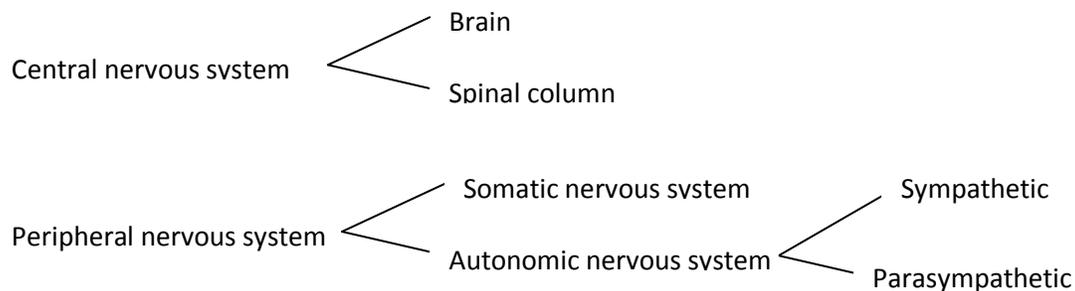
all programmed into our bodies when there were no paved roads or PF Flyers. To conserve energy for the all important fight or flight for survival, repair systems, digestive systems, and reproductive systems are all suppressed. We produce substances like adrenaline and increase our blood sugar levels to give us energy and stamina. Activation of the sympathetic nervous system is carried out in less than a second. When there's a lion, tiger or bear threatening us, this system comes to our rescue and activates the action response of fight or flight.

But this same system can also make us ill because it can activate when there is no bear or lion to fight or run away from but just traffic jams or work deadlines that threaten us. By its very nature, the sympathetic nervous system puts human beings in a combative, competitive place—not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. Changes in brain chemistry create a sense of vigilance, apprehension, and a focus on possible future outcomes. A sense of urgency prevails.

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, we don't stop and smell the roses. It's difficult to focus on the present moment, difficult to connect with others in a kind, gentle manner and impossible to rest and recover. Only when our sense of danger, emergency and fear dissipates does the system becomes deactivated so we can return to a neutral steady state.

And if you're very lucky, that's when another system becomes activated. That system is called the parasympathetic nervous system.

This diagram shows the basic structure of this incredible system:



Parasympathetic Parapower

The parasympathetic nervous system activates systems that allow for maximum recovery and replenishing of our bodies and minds. Parasympathetic activation can create profound experiences of joy, creativity, connectedness and good will. Sleep and rest are good examples of parasympathetic activation. When we sleep, we awake feeling refreshed and when we're forced into bed because of illness, the rest helps us recover and recuperate.

But it has always been difficult for us to stop "running," to stop the seductive attractions of production. "Stop or be stoned" was one culture's answer to this tenacious human tendency to do more and more and more and to want more and more and more. The Sabbath was to be a time for rest, and the law states that both the people and the land were to keep the Sabbath: one out of seven days for people and one out of seven years for the land. The wisdom of the ancients was that the yield of the land would be poor in quality and quantity if the farmer kept planting it, and the fruit brought forth in a person's life would be equally poor without time to rest, replenish, and restore.

There is a close correlation between rest and spiritual development. For eons, the spiritual masters have observed that quieting the mind in prayerful meditation is linked with the experience of spiritual awakening and enlightenment. Creative insights often arrived at night in what is often called "twilight sleep," a time when the brain can synthesize material in a non-linear fashion.

A profound sense of wellbeing often accompanies the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system. As we enter this state of rest; our sympathetic nervous system-driven need for fight is allowed to rest. When we enter this state of parapower, our need to flee and withdraw into our cave for safety is replaced by the inner sense that there is no threat here. We draw near to each other with hands extended, with hearts capable of empathically attuned compassion.

Every culture has developed the means and methods to access this state of extreme parasympathetic engagement, sometimes through music, sometimes through rituals, sometimes through drink, drugs, or food. It's such a powerful state in its potential to direct human behavior that almost every religion has captured its essence in its teachings.

In her book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, Karen Armstrong writes about the transcendent moment experienced by the founders of the great religious movements. Through their own personal transcendence, these founders helped to usher in great transformational periods. Armstrong found that the descriptions of those transcendent moments were remarkably similar, regardless of the religion. She writes:

"...it produces a sensation of calm, harmony, and equanimity said to be comparable to the effect of music. There was a feeling of grandeur, expansiveness, and nobility—a sense of presence.... There was nothing supernatural about these experiences...they had discovered a new dimension of their own humanity."

When the parasympathetic system is engaged, the body's energy systems slow down. The brain fires more slowly; producing more delta and theta waves. (Theta is the slow brain wave that accompanies daydreaming and meditation.) Andrew Newburg, a medical professor and researcher at the University of Pennsylvania studied Tibetan Buddhists and cloistered nuns and, in his book, *Why God Won't Go Away*, details his work measuring the theta brain waves that infused the brains of those in deep states of prayer and meditation.

In her work recording the brain waves of healers and awakened individuals, Anna Wise found that these people tend to have more theta-wave activity than the average person. She outlines her findings in her book, *The High Performance Mind: Mastering Brainwaves for Insight, Healing, and Creativity*.

It seems that slowing down tunes us in as spiritual receivers, turns us towards our spiritual nature, and transforms the mundane into the significant. It may even transfuse our surroundings: when they arrive to this state, my clients often ask me if I have turned up the lights. Others have remarked that I appeared to light up when I attain this state—a fairly remarkable observation to be made about this dark-skinned, dark-haired woman! Perhaps the halos found in paintings of spiritually engaged people were due to this effect.

Scientists' studies of the electrical rhythms of the heart have led to popular personal training devices like the EMwave, Wild Divine or Stress Eraser. The heart, like the brain, is a neural net, and each heart has its own way of "knowing." When we initiate the slow breath used by the yogis—about 7 breaths per minute instead of the usual 12 for an adult—the heart's frequencies begin to harmonize, which facilitates activation of the parasympathetic system.

Through practice and patience, I've become better and better at activating my parapower. I have experienced my spiritual essence as subtle, like the wind on my face, difficult to capture. When fully experienced, it's caressing and ethereal and affirming and sublime and delightful and funny and healing. My hope is that we'll all begin shifting away from the need to be so sympathetically and frenetically engaged with life, and we'll all take time for a Sabbath—time to shift into the lower frequencies that can tune us into our parapowers!

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