

The wit and wisdom of Harriet Beecher Stowe

It may come as a surprise to many that Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) — famed for her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* — campaigned just as passionately and wittily for good health, good nutrition, and good ventilation in churches, seminaries, and trains.



In 1866, this remarkable woman contributed an article to *The Atlantic Monthly* by the intriguing title, “Bodily Religion: a Sermon on Good Health” “The fowl air generated by one ongregation,” she wrote, “is locked up by the sexton for the use of the next assembly; and so gathers and gathers from week to week, and month to month, while devout persons are ready to tear their hair because they feel stupid and sleep in church.

“Revivals of religion, with ministers and the people who take most interest in them, often end in periods of bodily ill-health and depression (because) of people breathing poison from each other’s lungs.

“The proper ventilation of their churches and vestries would remove that spiritual deadness of which their prayers and hymns complain.

“In contrast, a man hoeing his corn out on a breezy hillside is bright and alert, his mind works clearly, and he feels interested in religion.

“The want of suitable ventilation in schoolrooms, offices, courtrooms, churches, law schools, medical schools, and theology schools is something simply appalling. Of itself it would answer the question why so many thousand glad, active children come to a middle life without joy.”

Mrs. Stowe, her husband, Congregationalist Pastor Calvin Stowe, and her brother, Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher (also renowned for his wit) were among many Christians who led a health reform movement in the mid-19th- century. Like Ellen White and Methodism’s John Wesley, their focus was on prevention.

Mrs. Stowe, the mother of five children, wrote articles for magazines to supplement her husband's meager pastor's salary.

After her son, Charlie, became ill and died in 1849. she became keenly healthy lifestyles.

She wrote: "Like the principles of spiritual religion, the principles of physical religion are few and easy to understand: an old medical apothegm personifies the hygienic forces as Doctor Air, Doctor Diet, Doctor Exercise, and Doctor Quiet. (*JN* would add Doctor Laughter to that list.)

"The return to the great primitive elements of health — clean water, clean air, and simple, fresh food, with a regular system of exercise — has brought to many a jaded, weary, worn-down human being the elastic spirits and the sound sleep of a little child."

(*JN* will carry other insightful excerpts from Harriet Beecher Stowe's sermon on "Bodily Religion" in a forthcoming issue.)

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