

*The American Woman's Home;
Or, Principles of Domestic Science (1860)*

Catharine and Harriet Beecher Stowe

Introduction

Catharine and Harriet Beecher were born in Connecticut to influential Presbyterian and social reformer Lyman Beecher. Both sisters pursued as much education as they were allowed, and both became educators themselves. Catharine Beecher founded the Hartford Female Seminary in 1823 where she taught until 1832. Beecher founded dozens of schools throughout the country, including several dedicated to the education of young women. She also wrote dozens of textbooks, instructional manuals, and other educational material. Her best-known book, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, published in 1841, became an essential guide for the middle-class home.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was also an educator and writer, best known for her anti-slavery book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852. The book deeply influenced the attitudes of white northerners toward African Americans and the urgency of ending slavery.

Catharine and Harriet wrote several articles about how to organize a clean and healthy home during the 1840s and 50s. In 1860, they published a collection of their guidelines for proper middle-class living in *The American Woman's Home*. Below is an excerpt from the book¹.

Primary Source

CHAPTER XVII.

HABITS OF SYSTEM AND ORDER.

Any discussion of the equality of the sexes, as to intellectual capacity, seems frivolous and useless, both because it can never be decided, and because there would be no possible advantage in the decision. But one topic, which is often drawn into this discussion, is of far more consequence; and that is, the relative importance and difficulty of the duties a woman is called to perform.

¹Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, [*The American Woman's Home; Or Principles of Domestic Science*](#), 1860. Believed to be in the public domain.

It is generally assumed, and almost as generally conceded, that a housekeeper's business and cares are contracted and trivial; and that the proper discharge of her duties demands far less expansion of mind and vigor of intellect than the pursuits of the other sex. This idea has prevailed because women, as a mass, have never been educated with reference to their most important duties; while that portion of their employments which is of least value has been regarded as the chief, if not the sole, concern of a woman. The covering of the body, the convenience of residences, and the gratification of the appetite, have been too much regarded as the chief objects on which her intellectual powers are to be exercised.

But as society gradually shakes off the remnants of barbarism and the intellectual and moral interests of man rise, in estimation, above the merely sensual, a truer estimate is formed of woman's duties, and of the measure of intellect requisite for the proper discharge of them. Let any man of sense and discernment become the member of a large household, in which a well-educated and pious woman is endeavoring systematically to discharge her multiform duties; let him fully comprehend all her cares, difficulties, and perplexities; and it is probable he would coincide in the opinion that no statesman, at the head of a nation's affairs, had more frequent calls for wisdom, firmness, tact, discrimination, prudence, and versatility of talent, than such a woman.

She has a husband, to whose peculiar tastes and habits she must accommodate herself; she has children whose health she must guard, whose physical constitutions she must study and develop, whose temper and habits she must regulate, whose principles she must form, whose pursuits she must guide. She has constantly changing domestics, with all varieties of temper and habits, whom she must govern, instruct, and direct; she is required to regulate the finances of the domestic state, and constantly to adapt expenditures to the means and to the relative claims of each department. She has the direction of the kitchen, where ignorance, forgetfulness, and awkwardness are to be so regulated that the various operations shall each start at the right time, and all be in completeness at the same given hour. She has the claims of society to meet, visits to receive and return, and the duties of hospitality to sustain. She has the poor to relieve; benevolent societies to aid; the schools of her children to inquire and decide about; the care of the sick and the aged; the nursing of infancy; and the endless miscellany of odd items, constantly recurring in a large family.

Surely, it is a pernicious and mistaken idea, that the duties which tax a woman's mind are petty, trivial, or unworthy of the highest grade of intellect and moral worth. Instead of allowing this feeling, every woman should imbibe, from early youth, the impression that she is in training for the discharge of the most important, the most difficult, and the most sacred and interesting duties that can possibly employ the highest intellect. She ought to feel that her station and responsibilities in the great drama of life are second to none, either as viewed by her Maker, or in the estimation of all minds whose judgment is most worthy of respect.

She who is the mother and housekeeper in a large family is the sovereign of an empire, demanding more varied cares, and involving more difficult duties, than are really exacted of her who wears a crown and professedly regulates the interests of the greatest nation on earth. There is no one thing more necessary to a housekeeper in performing her varied duties, than a habit of system and order; and yet, the peculiarly desultory nature of women's pursuits, and the

embarrassments resulting from the state of domestic service in this country, render it very difficult to form such a habit. But it is sometimes the case that women who could and would carry forward a systematic plan of domestic economy do not attempt it, simply from a want of knowledge of the various modes of introducing it. It is with reference to such, that various modes of securing system and order, which the writer has seen adopted, will be pointed out.

A wise economy is nowhere more conspicuous, than in a systematic apportionment of time to different pursuits. There are duties of a religious, intellectual, social, and domestic nature, each having different relative claims on attention. Unless a person has some general plan of apportioning these claims, some will intrench on others, and some, it is probable, will be entirely excluded. Thus, some find religious, social, and domestic duties so numerous, that no time is given to intellectual improvement. Others find either social, or benevolent, or religious interests excluded by the extent and variety of other engagements.

It is wise, therefore, for all persons to devise a systematic plan, which they will at least keep in view, and aim to accomplish; and by which a proper proportion of time shall be secured for all the duties of life.

In forming such a plan, every woman must accommodate herself to the peculiarities of her situation. If she has a large family and a small income, she must devote far more time to the simple duty of providing food and raiment than would be right were she in affluence, and with a small family. It is impossible, therefore, to draw out any general plan, which all can adopt. But there are some general principles, which ought to be the guiding rules, when a woman arranges her domestic employments. These principles are to be based on Christianity, which teaches us to "seek first the kingdom of God," and to deem food, raiment, and the conveniences of life, as of secondary account. Every woman, then, ought to start with the assumption, that the moral and religious interests of her family are of more consequence than any worldly concern, and that, whatever else may be sacrificed, these shall be the leading object, in all her arrangements, in respect to time, money, and attention.

It is also one of the plainest requisitions of Christianity, that we devote some of our time and efforts to the comfort and improvement of others. There is no duty so constantly enforced, both in the Old and New Testament, as that of charity, in dispensing to those who are destitute of the blessings we enjoy. In selecting objects of charity, the same rule applies to others as to ourselves; their moral and religious interests are of the highest moment, and for them, as well as for ourselves, we are to "seek first the kingdom of God."

Another general principle is, that our intellectual and social interests are to be preferred to the mere gratification of taste or appetite. A portion of time, therefore, must be devoted to the cultivation of the intellect and the social affections.

Another is, that the mere gratification of appetite is to be placed last in our estimate; so that, when a question arises as to which shall be sacrificed, some intellectual, moral, or social advantage, or some gratification of sense, we should invariably sacrifice the last.

As health is indispensable to the discharge of every duty, nothing which sacrifices that blessing is to be allowed in order to gain any other advantage or enjoyment. There are emergencies, when it is right to risk health and life, to save ourselves and others from greater evils; but these are exceptions, which do not militate against the general rule. Many persons imagine that, if they violate the laws of health, in order to attend to religious or domestic duties, they are guiltless before God. But such greatly mistake. We directly violate the law, "Thou shalt not kill," when we do what tends to risk or shorten our own life. The life and happiness of all his creatures are dear to our Creator; and he is as much displeased when we injure our own interests, as when we injure those of others. The idea, therefore, that we are excusable if we harm no one but ourselves, is false and pernicious. These, then, are some general principles, to guide a woman in systematizing her duties and pursuits².

The Creator of all things is a Being of perfect system and order; and, to aid us in our duty in this respect, he has divided our time, by a regularly returning day of rest from worldly business. In following this example, the intervening six days maybe subdivided to secure similar benefits. In doing this, a certain portion of time must be given to procure the means of livelihood, and for preparing food, raiment, and dwellings. To these objects, some must devote more, and others less, attention. The remainder of time not necessarily thus employed, might be divided somewhat in this manner: The leisure of two afternoons and evenings could be devoted to religious and benevolent objects, such as religious meetings, charitable associations, school visiting, and attention to the sick and poor. The leisure of two other days might be devoted to intellectual improvement, and the pursuits of taste. The leisure of another day might be devoted to social enjoyments, in making or receiving visits; and that of another, to miscellaneous domestic pursuits, not included in the other particulars.

It is probable that few persons could carry out such an arrangement very strictly; but every one can make a systematic apportionment of time, and at least aim at accomplishing it; and they can also compare with such a general outline, the time which they actually devote to these different objects, for the purpose of modifying any mistaken proportions.

Without attempting any such systematic employment of time, and carrying it out, so far as they can control circumstances, most women are rather driven along by the daily occurrences of life; so that, instead of being the intelligent regulators of their own time, they are the mere sport of circumstances. There is nothing which so distinctly marks the difference between weak and strong minds as the question, whether they control circumstances or circumstances control them. It is very much to be feared, that the apportionment of time actually made by most women exactly inverts the order required by reason and Christianity. Thus, the furnishing a needless variety of food, the conveniences of dwellings, and the adornments of dress, often take a larger portion of time than is given to any other object. Next after this, comes intellectual improvement; and, last of all, benevolence and religion.

It may be urged, that it is indispensable for most persons to give more time to earn a livelihood, and to prepare food, raiment, and dwellings, than, to any other object. But it may be asked, how

² This is a profound statement: *The idea, therefore, that we are excusable if we harm no one but ourselves, is false and pernicious.* Would we call this self-care today?

much of the time, devoted to these objects, is employed in preparing varieties of food not necessary, but rather injurious, and how much is spent for those parts of dress and furniture not indispensable, and merely ornamental? Let a woman subtract from her domestic employments all the time given to pursuits which are of no use, except as they gratify a taste for ornament, or minister increased varieties to tempt the appetite, and she will find that much which she calls "domestic duty," and which prevents her attention to intellectual, benevolent, and religious objects, should be called by a very different name.

No woman has a right to give up attention to the higher interests of herself and others, for the ornaments of person or the gratification of the palate. To a certain extent, these lower objects are lawful and desirable; but when they intrude on nobler interests, they become selfish and degrading. Every woman, then, when employing her hands in ornamenting her person, her children, or her house, ought to calculate whether she has devoted as much time to the really more important wants of herself and others. If she has not, she may know that she is doing wrong, and that her system for apportioning her time and pursuits should be altered. Some persons endeavor to systematize their pursuits by apportioning them to particular hours of each day. For example, a certain period before breakfast, is given to devotional duties; after breakfast, certain hours are devoted to exercise and domestic employments; other hours, to sewing, or reading, or visiting; and others, to benevolent duties. But in most cases, it is more difficult to systematize the hours of each day, than it is to secure some regular division of the week.

In regard to the minutia of family work, the writer has known the following methods to be adopted. Monday, with some of the best housekeepers, is devoted to preparing for the labors of the week. Any extra cooking, the purchasing of articles to be used during the week, the assorting of clothes for the wash, and mending such as would otherwise be injured—these, and similar items, belong to this day. Tuesday is devoted to washing, and Wednesday to ironing. On Thursday, the ironing is finished off, the clothes are folded and put away, and all articles which need mending are put in the mending-basket, and attended to. Friday is devoted to sweeping and house-cleaning. On Saturday, and especially the last Saturday of every month, every department is put in order; the casters and table furniture are regulated, the pantry and cellar inspected, the trunks, drawers, and closets arranged, and every thing about the house put in order for Sunday. By this regular recurrence of a particular time for inspecting every thing, nothing is forgotten till ruined by neglect.

Another mode of systematizing relates to providing proper supplies of conveniences, and proper places in which to keep them. Thus, some ladies keep a large closet, in which are placed the tubs, pails, dippers, soap-dishes, starch, blueing, clothes-lines, clothes-pins, and every other article used in washing; and in the same, or another place, is kept every convenience for ironing. In the sewing department, a trunk, with suitable partitions, is provided, in which are placed, each in its proper place, white thread of all sizes, colored thread, yarns for mending, colored and black sewing-silks and twist, tapes and bobbins of all sizes, white and colored welting-cords, silk braids and cords, needles of all sizes, papers of pins, remnants of linen and colored cambric, a supply of all kinds of buttons used in the family, black and white hooks and eyes, a yard measure, and all the patterns used in cutting and fitting. These are done up in separate parcels, and labeled. In another trunk, or in a piece-bag, such as has been previously described, are kept

all pieces used in mending, arranged in order. A trunk, like the first mentioned, will save many steps, and often much time and perplexity; while by purchasing articles thus by the quantity, they come much cheaper than if bought in little portions as they are wanted. Such a trunk should be kept locked, and a smaller supply for current use retained in a work-basket.

A full supply of all conveniences in the kitchen and cellar, and a place appointed for each article, very much facilitate domestic labor. For want of this, much vexation and loss of time is occasioned while seeking vessels in use, or in cleansing those employed by different persons for various purposes. It would be far better for a lady to give up some expensive article in the parlor, and apply the money thus saved for kitchen conveniences, than to have a stinted supply where the most labor is to be performed. If our countrywomen would devote more to comfort and convenience, and less to show, it would be a great improvement. Expensive mirrors and pier-tables in the parlor, and an unpainted, gloomy, ill-furnished kitchen, not unfrequently are found under the same roof.

Another important item in systematic economy is, the apportioning of regular employment to the various members of a family. If a housekeeper can secure the cooperation of all her family, she will find that "many hands make light work." There is no greater mistake than in bringing up children to feel that they must be taken care of, and waited on by others, without any corresponding obligations on their part. The extent to which young children can be made useful in a family would seem surprising to those who have never seen a systematic and regular plan for utilizing their services. The writer has been in a family where a little girl, of eight or nine years of age, washed and dressed herself and young brother, and made their small beds, before breakfast; set and cleared all the tables for meals, with a little help from a grown person in moving tables and spreading cloths; while all the dusting of parlors and chambers was also neatly performed by her. A brother of ten years old brought in and piled all the wood used in the kitchen and parlor, brushed the boots and shoes, went on errands, and took all the care of the poultry. They were children whose parents could afford to hire servants to do this, but who chose to have their children grow up healthy and industrious, while proper instruction, system, and encouragement made these services rather a pleasure than otherwise, to the children.

Some parents pay their children for such services; but this is hazardous, as tending to make them feel that they are not bound to be helpful without pay, and also as tending to produce a hoarding, money-making spirit. But where children have no hoarding propensities, and need to acquire a sense of the value of property, it may be well to let them earn money for some extra services rather as a favor. When this is done, they should be taught to spend it for others, as well as for themselves; and in this way, a generous and liberal spirit will be cultivated.

There are some mothers who take pains to teach their boys most of the domestic arts which their sisters learn. The writer has seen boys mending their own garments and aiding their mother or sisters in the kitchen, with great skill and adroitness; and, at an early age, they usually very much relish joining in such occupations. The sons of such mothers, in their college life, or in roaming about the world, or in nursing a sick wife or infant, find occasion to bless the forethought and kindness which prepared them for such emergencies. Few things are in worse taste than for a man needlessly to busy himself in women's work; and yet a man never appears in a more interesting attitude than when, by skill in such matters, he can save a mother or wife from care

and suffering. The more a boy is taught to use his hands, in every variety of domestic employment, the more his faculties, both of mind and body, are developed; for mechanical pursuits exercise the intellect as well as the hands. The early training of New-England boys, in which they turn their hand to almost every thing, is one great reason of the quick perceptions, versatility of mind, and mechanical skill, for which that portion of our countrymen is distinguished.

It is equally important that young girls should be taught to do some species of handicraft that generally is done by men, and especially with reference to the frequent emigration to new territories where well-trained mechanics are scarce. To hang wall-paper, repair locks, glaze windows, and mend various household articles, requires a skill in the use of tools which every young girl should acquire. If she never has any occasion to apply this knowledge and skill by her own hands, she will often find it needful in directing and superintending incompetent workmen. The writer has known one mode of systematizing the aid of the older children in a family, which, in some cases of very large families, it may be well to imitate. In the case referred to, when the oldest daughter was eight or nine years old, an infant sister was given to her, as her special charge. She tended it, made and mended its clothes, taught it to read, and was its nurse and guardian, through all its childhood. Another infant was given to the next daughter, and thus the children were all paired in this interesting relation. In addition to the relief thus afforded to the mother, the elder children, were in this way qualified for their future domestic relations, and both older and younger bound to each other by peculiar ties of tenderness and gratitude.

In offering these examples of various modes of systematizing, one suggestion may be worthy of attention. It is not unfrequently the case, that ladies, who find themselves cumbered with oppressive cares, after reading remarks on the benefits of system, immediately commence the task of arranging their pursuits, with great vigor and hope. They divide the day into regular periods, and give each hour its duty; they systematize their work, and endeavor to bring every thing into a regular routine. But, in a short time, they find themselves baffled, discouraged, and disheartened, and finally relapse into their former desultory ways, in a sort of resigned despair.

The difficulty, in such cases, is, that they attempt too much at a time. There is nothing which so much depends upon habit, as a systematic mode of performing duty; and where no such habit has been formed, it is impossible for a novice to start, at once, into a universal mode of systematizing, which none but an adept could carry through. The only way for such persons is to begin with a little at a time. Let them select some three or four things, and resolutely attempt to conquer at these points. In time, a habit will be formed, of doing a few things at regular periods, and in a systematic way. Then it will be easy to add a few more; and thus, by a gradual process, the object can be secured, which it would be vain to attempt by a more summary course.

Early rising is almost an indispensable condition to success, in such an effort; but where a woman lacks either the health or the energy to secure a period for devotional duties before breakfast, let her select that hour of the day in which she will be least liable to interruption, and let her then seek strength and wisdom from the only true Source. At this time, let her take a pen, and make a list of all the things which she considers as duties. Then, let a calculation be made, whether there be time enough, in the day or the week, for all these duties. If there be not, let the least important be stricken from the list, as not being duties, and therefore to be omitted. In doing

this, let a woman remember that, though "what we shall eat, and what we shall think, and wherewithal we shall be clothed," are matters requiring due attention, they are very apt to obtain a wrong relative importance, while intellectual, social, and moral interests receive too little regard.

In this country, eating, dressing, and household furniture and ornaments, take far too large a place in the estimate of relative importance; and it is probable that most women could modify their views and practice, so as to come nearer to the Saviour's requirements. No woman has a right to put a stitch of ornament on any article of dress or furniture, or to provide one superfluity in food, until she is sure she can secure time for all her social, intellectual benevolent, and religious duties. If a woman will take the trouble to make such a calculation as this, she will usually find that she has time enough to perform all her duties easily and well.

It is impossible for a conscientious woman to secure that peaceful mind and cheerful enjoyment of life which all should seek, who is constantly finding her duties jarring with each other, and much remaining undone, which she feels that she ought to do. In consequence of this, there will be a secret uneasiness, which will throw a shade over the whole current of life, never to be removed, till she so efficiently defines and regulates her duties that she can fulfill them all. And here the writer would urge upon young ladies the importance of forming habits of system, while unembarrassed with those multiplied cares which will make the task so much, more difficult and hopeless. Every young lady can systematize her pursuits, to a certain extent. She can have a particular day for mending her wardrobe, and for arranging her trunks, closets, and drawers. She can keep her work-basket, her desk at school, and all her other conveniences, in their proper places, and in regular order. She can have regular periods for reading, walking, visiting, study, and domestic pursuits. And by following this method in youth, she will form a taste for regularity and a habit of system, which will prove a blessing to her through life.