

Replicating Harriet Beecher Stowe's Experiences in Florida

By John T. Foster, Jr.

While Harriet Beecher Stowe lived in Florida for part of seventeen years, it would be wrong to assume she lived like modern snowbirds or even as modern Floridians. It's not that Stowe was born over two hundred years ago, or that she lived when the state was the least populated in the South. The novelist brought her own perspective to her experiences here— a perspective different from people today and also different from many of her contemporaries. Yet if one reads and reflects on Stowe's fifty-some articles about travel to Florida, or her experience in Florida, a pattern emerges. The novelist's father, the nationally known minister, Lyman Beecher, believed his daughter to be a "genius." While there are very grave problems in assuming that our experiences would be the same as those of a person with incredible gifts, Stowe left distinct clues. By putting the clues together, we can gain insight into Stowe's experiences and the potential of replicating them today. This paper is an invitation to experience Florida through the novelist.

In understanding Stowe's own perspective, it is important to realize that she did not conceive of herself as solely a novelist. As Christopher Benfey puts it, "She considered herself as an artist as well as a writer."¹ The New York Times observed at Stowe's death that "...she was an artist only in the second place, and if she had not become famous by her writings her transcripts of natural scenes in color would have won her credit enough to satisfy most women."²

As one reads Harriet Beecher Stowe's Florida articles, it also becomes clear that the novelist was also a naturalist. In just one article about her trip to Silver Springs, she identifies nine types of trees—palmetto, cypress, water ash, loblolly bay, magnolia glauca, red maple,

water oaks, magnolia grand flora, and water maple. In that same article Stowe identifies ten types of birds—aningas, limpkins, white cranes, blue cranes, curlews, turkeys, red-winged blackbirds, green and gold parquets, and herons.³

On the same journey, the novelist carefully describes the weather. It was a “bright day” with “fine open air.” Another is “balmy” with “slanting sunbeams.” After a hot day, the weather turned as “lovely a day as the heart could imagine, angelically clear and fresh.” On a different occasion, she uses the following words: there was a “soft, fresh sun and river breezes were breathing back and forth between the St. Johns and the ocean.” The day is “dream-like in fairness, in stillness” with “dusky luminousness.” In the afternoon she observes, “lovely gleams and effects of color steal in through open doors.” The very next morning began in “hazy stillness.”⁴

On the journey to Silver Springs, Harriet Beecher Stowe spent much of her time sitting outside on the deck of a steamboat. Biographer Mary Graff notes that when she was in Mandarin, Stowe sat on the porch or wandered around. She could be seen “sauntering along the boardwalk on the river bank, wrapped in the silence of her private world.”⁵ As a genius, Stowe was not lost in aimless thought. She actually paid attention to what she saw—the flowers, the trees, the birds—and she did this when they were transformed by a perfect day. Even the weeds—Jonah’s Gourd, pig weed, and coffee beans—didn’t escape her notice: “All along the low lands fronting our row of Mandarin houses are the gigantic skeletons of weeds that have run their course—great succulent, summer monsters...” There are pigweeds with “a trunk like a strong man’s arm and an array of branches where the fowls of heaven might rest.”⁶

As the daughter of a minister and the sister of seven clerics, Stowe possessed an in-depth knowledge of scripture. She would have surmised that the following words represent a modern version of the beginning of the 19th Psalm:⁷

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use not words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

These words proclaim a connection between nature and the spiritual—an experience that Stowe fully embraced. She might have accepted a modification of the psalm's beginning:

Nature, the flowers, the butterflies, the trees, the orange
blossoms declare the glory of God;
they proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
Day after day they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use not words;
no sound is heard from them.

Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

To replicate Stowe's experience seems straightforward. Pick a lovely day, or better, choose a bright, sunny afternoon. Go outside about thirty minutes before sunset, just when everything is slowly becoming transformed by yellow. Walk or sit in a garden, or park, or some other pleasant setting. Stare carefully at the trees, flowers, and birds bathed in yellow light. In time, watch even the pine bark turn to gold and then, on some occasions, amber. The perfect sunset in Florida transforms even drab gray moss. Stowe possessed great powers of concentration: focus only on what you see.⁸ This experience becomes "smell the roses" on an immense scale, multiplied infinitely. Assume that the "glory of God is declared." Every once in a while repeat the quotation: "The glory of God is declared." Lose yourself in absolute beauty. Stowe was spiritually intoxicated, intentionally lost in a naturally induced ecstasy. This is what the novelist did, confirmed in one of her poems:

"Summer Studies:"

Why shouldst thou study in the month of June
The dusty books of Greek and Hebrew lore,
When the Great Teacher of all glorious things
Passes in hourly light before thy door?

There is a brighter book unrolling now:
Fair are its leaves as is the tree of heaven,
All veined, and dewed, and gemmed with wondrous signs,
To which a healing mystic power is given.

Cease, cease to think, and be content to be;
Swing safe at anchor in fair nature's bay;
Reason no more, but o'er thy quiet soul
Let God's sweet teachings ripple their soft way.

Soar with the bird, and flutter with the leaf;
Dance with the seeded grass in fringy play;
Sail with the cloud; wave with the dreamy pine;
And float with nature all the life-long day.

Notes:

1. Christopher Benfey. *A Summer of Hummingbirds* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 52.
2. New York Times, 2 July, 1896.
3. Foster and Foster. *Calling and Yankees to Florida*, 30-33.
4. Ibid., 80-84.
5. Mary B. Graff, *Mandarin and the St. Johns*, 49.
6. Foster, 66.
7. Verses 1-4. New International Version
8. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 125.