

The dawn of a new 'Age' for Friedan

A founder of feminism works to erase the stigma of growing old

By Karen S. Peterson
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* helped start the social cataclysm called feminism. Now, 30 years later, she is ready to start another revolution — against "the myths of aging."

In her 40th-floor Manhattan apartment — defined by colorful paintings and heavy

antique furniture — the diminutive Friedan talks about her new book, which she hopes will spark that revolution. The age mystique, she says, will be harder to crack than the feminine mystique.

That was the label she gave so long ago to "the problem with no name," the malignant frustration felt by some women unfulfilled by home and family. Her first book — both heralded and reviled — birthed new options for women, possibilities now virtually taken for granted.

Today she looks at "the strengths that have no name," the "qualities that emerge with aging." And a major target for her new *The Fountain of Age* (Simon & Schuster, \$25) are those in their 40s and 50s.

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By Larry Ford

CREATING UNDERSTANDING: Betty Friedan says she's trying to 'break through this distorted, false, obsolete image of aging.'

COVER STORY

Society 'is obsessed with youth'

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Middle-agers "are the ones holding on most strongly to the image of age as this horror, this dreary miasma of decline and deterioration," says Friedan, 72. "They distance themselves from age the most, clinging to the images of youth. And these people are our leaders!"

Everybody, she says, "is obsessed with youth, in such denial about aging. I am trying to break through this distorted, false, obsolete image of aging to the growth and development that takes place in the new years of life after youth." She gestures expansively as she makes point after point.

Over about a dozen years of detective work, Friedan marshaled the latest studies showing aging is not an inevitable trip to the dustbin. Not that there are that many studies of those who age well, she says.

The money goes to studying diseases such as Alzheimer's — "and only 5% of those over 65 have Alzheimer's; only 5% are in nursing homes." Alzheimer's is a disease, she says; aging is not.

In their "post-parental" years, the aging can "slough off the irrelevant details and see life as a whole," she says. "They have a lifetime of experiences, wisdom." Many develop "new intuitions," as men strengthen their nurturing side and women move to greater independence. Both can progress to "generativity," improving life for the next generation.

The keys she finds to a satisfying "third stage" of life are "control of one's own life; the ability to respond to change; ties with family and friends; and a sense of purpose."

Recently those beliefs were tested dramatically, while her tome was at the printers. During a hike at Yosemite, she went into heart failure. "I didn't think I was going to die, I really didn't. But I phoned my publisher that this might have to come out posthumously." She spent the summer at her 1820s saltbox home in Sag Harbor, N.Y., recovering from surgery to replace an infected heart valve.

The first operation didn't work. "This Jewish body couldn't accept a pig's valve." While hospitalized, she had a second choice: a valve from either a 54-year-old man or a 17-year-

old girl. "I chose the girl, but the donor turned out to actually be a boy." She loves the irony for a feminist.

During recovery she felt "buoyed up by love" from her three children, eight grandchildren and legions of friends. She has, she says, "lost my terror of death; I can live with its reality."

She still keeps a lecture, teaching and writing schedule — aided with only an answering machine — that would daunt a twentysomething. "I have a great deal of energy."

An intellectual pit bull, Friedan is now ready to lead a new cause. Younger leaders of her first one — feminism — booted her out in 1981, after she wrote *The Second Stage*. "I am not politically correct for some of these women's studies people."

Second Stage said feminism had become anti-male, was mired in sexual politics and championed only women who wanted careers and ignored those who wanted children.

In *Backlash*, Susan Faludi wrote Friedan's new thinking was muddy and she was "stomping on a movement that she did so much to create." And: "Friedan's tirades against anyone who didn't pay proper homage to her legacy are legendary."

The attacks have stung Friedan. "It hurt a lot when people called me a traitor." She says she simply meant the "movement must evolve," move on. After losing the internecine battles, she is still "committed to the women's movement," but now in the role of "thinker, visionary."

Friedan's ego, tirades, quick outbursts and apologies are indeed legendary. In interviews, she has called herself hot-tempered, sometimes impatient, defensive and ambitious. In a 1992 *Playboy* interview, writer David Sheff noted, "She (was) good-humored and easy to talk with until she transformed, inexplicably, and became cantankerous. She is by nature candid and argumentative."

But today she is almost mellow — gracious, accommodating, willing to share some private thoughts:

▶ **Her ex-husband.** "Just recently I have become friends with the father of my children." Divorced in 1969 after 22 years of marriage, she has some regrets and wonders if she did all she could to make the mar-

riage work. "We had good years. . . . I can't go back to the houses we lived in and not burst into tears, because there was so much life lived there."

▶ **Sexual intimacy.** "Maybe I will still have — I would like to have — a good relationship of complete intimacy with a man. That is unfinished business." She has, she says, "given up the fantasy of remarriage."

▶ **Bad hair days.** "My hair is a mess," she says, as the photo shoot begins. "I have never worn a hat until this year, but I have one now. I bought it at Saks for \$70, and I use it when I don't like my hair."

▶ **Her mother.** Friedan's mother gave up her job to raise a family. "My mother had my fire, intelligence, energy. (But) in a sense, she made our lives miserable with her frustrations. . . . She gave me the emotional motivation to start the women's movement."

Born in Peoria, Ill., Friedan was an outsider who worked to develop friends. "Marginality makes you a good observer." She studied journalism and psychology at Smith College, but left her job as a New York magazine writer to raise a family.

Her resentment — plus years of research — produced the pivotal *The Feminine Mystique*. Her zeal helped create the National Organization for Women and the National Women's Political Caucus.

Thirteen years ago some experts tried to shift her attention to aging. Her response: "Yuck! That's dreary, dreary, dreary. And it doesn't apply to me!" But she did start some preliminary research, while still "in denial" about her own aging.

Friedan made the decision to go full bore when a woman, "obviously older than I was, with bright red hair and white roots, said to me, 'Oh, I hear you're doing a book on those poor old people.' I said, 'No. I am doing a book on us.'"

She writes in *The Fountain of Age*: "I began this quest with my own denial and fear of age. It ends with acceptance, affirmation, and celebration." Friedan once wanted her epitaph to read, "She made it possible for a woman to enjoy being a woman." Now she would like to add: "She made it possible for men and women to grow older successfully."