

Friedan put the mirror to our faces

This is what I remembered when the news of Betty Friedan's death on her 85th birthday came over the Internet. I remembered Aug. 26, 1970, the Women's Strike for Equality. I remembered Betty Friedan parading down New York's Fifth Avenue, in the front row, with tens of thousands of exhilarated women behind her.

I also remembered the afternoon edition of my paper illustrating that march with two front-page photos. On the left was the pretty, blonde, smiling figurehead of some unknown group of Happy Homemakers. On the right was Betty Friedan, mouth open in mid-shout, face contorted, as unattractive a photo of this woman as was ever chosen by any editor.



ELLEN
GOODMAN

Under both pictures ran a simple, loaded question asking readers: Which one do you choose?

This came to mind not only because Friedan won her place in the history books. It reminded me of exactly what this passionate and irascible, strong-willed and difficult woman was up against: a culture with prescribed roles for women and harsh ways of slapping down those who didn't conform. Betty Friedan, author and agitator, most assuredly did not conform. Not to Peoria, where she grew up. Not to suburbia, where she raised her children. Not even, always, to feminism.

Defining opus

Her book — the book — "The Feminine Mystique" was published in 1963, the year that Adlai Stevenson told my graduating class at Radcliffe how important our education would be in raising our children. It was released to paperback and fame in 1964, the year I worked in the sex-segregated research pool at Newsweek magazine — and thought I was lucky to have the job.

It's easy to forget now what it was like back then before Betty named "the problem that had no name" and, in futurist Alvin Toffler's words, "pulled the trigger on history." We

know how far women have come, but for every woman who believes life has improved, there is another who believes that life has become more stressful. Some of us believe both things at the same time.

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"It was a strange stirring," she wrote, "a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night — she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question — 'Is this all?'"

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The most powerful catalyst for change, sociologists will tell you, is when people learn what they already know. Friedan didn't invent the discontented housewife. She described the discontent.

For combating the mystique, she was shunned by neighbors. For her refusal to conform, her kids were kicked out of the car pool. She was called "more of a threat to the United States than the Russians." But with one resounding click of recognition, with one page turned after another, women who thought they were "the only one" came out of isolation and into a women's movement in the widest sense of that word.

Betty was dismissed as radical by the middle class and as middle class by the radicals. She helped found the National Organization for Women, the National Women's Political Caucus and NARAL. But she didn't brook fools easily nor did she brook disagreements gracefully. She teetered on high heels; the battles with her feminist peers were legendary.

A new tomorrow

Today "Desperate Housewives" is a television show. Mothers at home still bristle at her description of their "dissatisfaction." Four decades later we have mommy wars and arguments about educated women "opting out" of work. Women in Fortune 500 companies can also ask "Is this all?"

But no one can doubt her role in this unfinished revolution. Betty Friedan put her shoulder and her mind to the task of opening doors and widening that "narrow definition of 'the role of women.'"

In gratitude for that fine discontent, for that refusal to conform, let me say it one last time: Betty, you changed our lives.

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