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AT LUNCH WITH
Betty Friedan

Trying to Dispel 'The Mystique Of Age,' at 72

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IT is the day after Labor Day, and the old white house with the black shutters on Glover Street is asleep in the warm September sun. Even rudely repeated bangings on the front door cannot shake the quietude. Surreptitious peeks through the front parlor windows finally make it quite clear that no one is home. Then Betty Friedan arrives. But hardly with the frenzy and the fanfare that greeted her arrival at our first interview 23 years ago. On that day, surrounded by cheering women warriors in a Des Plaines, Ill., hotel, she sounded the call to arms for a general strike by women to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the vote. Now, on this sleepy summer day, she simply lurches into the driveway in a dusty old maroon Dodge.

She seems smaller now, less formidable. But then again, older warriors usually do. She is thinner, too, thanks to the recent loss of 25 pounds in the course of recovering from two bouts of surgery for heart valve replacements in the spring.

But it is the brown eyes that fascinate during the rest of the afternoon. The gaze behind the large dark-rimmed glasses is more pensive than it used to be. But it is also by turns direct, flinty, indignant, and engagingly merry. Later, during lunch, while describing the
sons, her voice catches, and she removes her glasses and blinks her welling eyes.

Betty Friedan, feminist leader and mother of the women's movement, may be less feisty and more mellow these days, but let no one assume that the grit is gone. Or for that matter, that Betty Friedan, at 72, has given up trying to revolutionize society.

"Now I am in uncharted territory," she says. "It isn't that I have stopped being a feminist, but women as a special separate interest group are not my concern anymore."

Her current concern is how to dispel what she calls "the mystique of age," or society's view of aging as simply a time of depletion and loss. "Just as darkness is sometimes defined as the absence of light, so age is defined as the absence of youth," she writes in "The Fountain of Age," a 671-page tome scheduled for publication Sept. 27 by Simon & Schuster.

The book, which took 10 years to research and write, challenges the stereotypes of older people much in the way that "The Feminine Mystique," her seminal 1963 study of women, challenged prevailing views and in the words of Alvin Toffler, "pulled the trigger on history."

Her years of research into human aging have convinced her that continued human and intellectual development is not only possible in the last third of life but can actually be the defining aspect of those years.

Ms. Friedan has spent the last six years sending cartons of notes and drafts back and forth to the West Coast, where she teaches in the winter at the University of Southern California. She is also a distinguished visiting professor at New York University.

While gerontologists tend to focus on how to deal with the problems of age arising from economic and physical decline, Betty Friedan is once again probing beyond problems for causes. Just as she spent years trying to fathom what lay behind housewife malaise, she has now put the same fierce intelligence and energy into asking whether the older years need be as dispiriting as they are generally thought to be.

"Once you break through the mystique of age and that view of the aged as objects of care and as problems for society, you can look at the reality of the new years of human life open to us," she says during a conversation that begins in her cheerful 1820 house and later continues a few blocks away at the American Hotel over grilled brook trout and a Bloody Mary and, finally, winds up during a three-and-a-half-hour drive to New York.

At the turn of the century, she says, life expectancy was 45 years for men and 46 for women, whereas now it is 70 years for men and 78 years for women.

"This is the one species that has now had more years after reproduction than before -- this new third to half of life that we didn't have before, this period of life in its own terms when everything is different," she says.

She worries that people who are in denial about old age, who feel threatened as they see it looming and go on telling themselves that they are still young, will miss its enormous potential.
"It's a different stage of life, and if you are going to pretend it's youth, you are going to miss it," she says. "You are going to miss the surprises, the possibilities and the evolution that we are just beginning to know about because there are no role models and there are no guide posts and there are no signs."

She found in her research that the men and women who continued to grow and develop most successfully during their older years became "more and more authentically themselves."

"They didn't care anymore what other people thought of them, you know, keeping up with the Joneses and 'Am I going to make a fool of myself?' They knew where they were, and they accepted it all -- the warts, the lines, the wrinkles. I found that somehow I thought that the people who were doing it the best were the ones who kept going and did what they were doing -- not constantly focused on terminal care and nursing homes -- and died in the midst of life."

She traces her own journey into this uncharted territory to her early research in the 1950's for "The Feminine Mystique." With a background as a psychology major at Smith College, from which she graduated summa cum laude in 1942, and as a fellow in psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, she began testing her new feminist theories by talking to older women who had combined motherhood and career to see how they had fared.

"The few women who had been able to combine those things were in their 50's or 60's, and they looked wonderful and were very vital," she says. "When I asked them about menopause, they said they hadn't had the menopause, and I thought to myself, 'Why was I finding these biological freaks when I was just looking for women who had gone beyond the feminine mystique?'

"Well, of course, it turned out that they had ceased their menstrual cycle, but since it hadn't been traumatic and they hadn't taken to their beds, they thought they hadn't had menopause. And it occurred to me then that the way you define yourself and see yourself as a person has a real effect on the aging process and even the biology of it."

The years went by. Ms. Friedan became one of the leaders in the battle for women and then, later, found herself in battle with some of her co-leaders, who disagreed with her view that the movement should be more inclusive of family life.

The split was worsened by the 1983 publication of her book, "The Second Stage," in which she said that the women's movement was being distorted by feminists who wanted to put down men and marriage and the family. Radical feminists accused Ms. Friedan of selling out.

Then one day, to her horror, friends gave her a surprise 60th birthday party, while she was still, in her words, "locked in my own denial about age."

"Age to me was just dreary, and I didn't want to think about it," she says with a grimace. "It had nothing to do with me personally."

But she was, as she says, "looking for a new question." She remembered her observations
about the women she had interviewed years before who had been too involved in what they were doing to pay much attention to menopause.

She began to wonder whether women whose lives had been changed by the women's movement might be experiencing a different kind of aging than those before them. She had a similar question about aging in men. So she started in on "The Fountain of Age."

If, as she has concluded, an involved life is the secret to aging successfully, Betty Friedan should be her own best research model. Besides her teaching, on subjects that include management and diversity, gun control, the economic concerns of women, sex and violence, and "Women, Men and media," she travels, cooks and loves to entertain.

"I've just gotten turned off by large cocktail parties," she says. "I like a small number of people where we can really talk to each other. Just enough of them so that we can crowd around that one table in my house. I refuse to make a seating plan. Everyone I invite is interesting to me and will be interesting to each other."

She reports jubilantly that the papers from her book have finally been packed up and sent off to the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Radcliffe. And for the first time in 25 years, Betty Friedan has been able to enjoy a summer without some kind of deadline to meet.

Her three children, their spouses and her six grandchildren all arrived in Sag Harbor at once -- grandchildren in the loft on cots and in sleeping bags and everyone crowding for meals at the long wooden table in the new addition to the house, which overlooks Upper Sag Harbor Bay.

"Sometimes, although not this summer, their father comes, too," she says, referring to Carl Friedan, from whom she has been divorced since 1969 but with whom she once again enjoys "proud parent" conversations.

She is also an intrepid traveler. In April, she was suddenly felled by an asthma attack just before giving a speech in Los Angeles. She got through the speech and then set off for a weekend of hiking at Yosemite National Park. Once there, she found she could hardly walk for lack of breath.

She ended up being sent back to Los Angeles by ambulance, only to find that an infection had completely eroded a heart valve. Doctors replaced it with a pig's valve, which the heart then rejected. "I like to say that my Jewish heart rejected the pig valve!" she says, laughing heartily.
When doctors could not locate a new valve, she took over and began to call her network of friends. Within four hours, two human valves had been found. "I had the choice of a 53-year-old man's heart valve or a 17-year old woman's. So, of course, I chose the woman's -- and it turned out to be a boy's!" (More hearty laughter.)

Then she set about recovering in what doctors called almost record time in order to appear at the American Booksellers Association meeting in Miami 10 days later, where she was scheduled to talk about her new book. She had to be wheeled to the stage in a wheelchair, but never mind that. "I worked it into the speech," she says.

It is this kind of spunk that keeps Betty Friedan going. Her lifelong asthma seems to have disappeared, so she is now considering an expedition to the Amazon rain forest and another one to Australia. She believes in being open to change and grabbing opportunity by the lapels when it presents itself.

In similar manner, she shrugs off questions about ill health and its effects on the aging process. "It's interesting how everybody wants to see old people as sick," she says. "They are not.

"They are not," she repeats emphatically.

She is also curiously dismissive about death, that stalker of the elderly. "Obviously, you can't deny death or ignore death," she says. "But I don't sense that death is what most people are afraid of."

Asked if she thinks much about it, she replies simply, "I don't much."