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 and cultural movement 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 only 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.

“Most women I know give up in their fifties. It’s the age when they have to learn to be an old person.”

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

“Today I look at the strengths that have no name,” the “qualities that emerge with aging.” And a major target for her new book The Fountain of Age (Simon & Schuster, $25) are those in their 40th and 50th.

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COVER STORY

Society ‘is obsessed with youth’

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Middling elders “are the ones holding on most strongly to the image of age at the bar, the devaluation of care of the elderly, as a result of the myth of decline and deterioration,” says Friedan. “They stick themselves from age to age, clinging to the image of youth. And these people are our leaders.”

Everybody, she says, “is obsessed with youth.” A book such as hers could start a trend. “I am trying to break through this dualism of old-fashioned, obsolete image of young people and the growth and development that takes place in the new years of life after youth.”

She still keeps a lecture, teaching and writing schedule — tied with only an intermittent machine — that would dwarf a twentiesomething. “I have a great deal of energy.”

An intellectual pit bull, Friedan is not ready to lead a new cause. Younger leaders of her first organization — the National Organization for Women — are in their 20s and 30s.

The money given to studying differences between the ages and only 5% of those over 65 have Alzheimer’s “are killing them in nursing homes.” Alzheimer’s is a disease, she says, “of the heart.”

In their “post-pregnatal years,” the aging can “play off the irrelevant role of women and a whole,” she says. “They have a lifetime of experiences and a lifetime of motivation, a lifetime of obligation, as men strengthen our muscles and move to greater independence. Both can progress to ‘generativity,’ improving the next generation.”

The keys she finds to a satisfying third phase of life are control of each own life, the ability to respond to changes, to maintain family, friends, and a sense of purpose.

Recently these beliefs were tested dramatically, while her name was at the printer’s. During a hike in Yosemite National Park, she says, “I didn’t think I was going to die, I really didn’t. But I was in the middle of my public speaking tour and I had to make it out of Yosemite Valley.”

Once she had reached San Francisco she was able to call Friedan to tell her she had been bitten by a spider. “I thought I was going to die and I thought of my public speaking tour and I said, ‘I have to get out of Yosemite Valley.’”

The first operation didn’t work. “The medical people couldn’t accept a big’s valve.” While hospitalized, she had a second choice a valve from either her 54-year-old twin or a 17-year-old girl. “I chose the girl, but the doctor turned out to actually be a boy.”

She loves the story for a feminist. During recovery she felt “bypassed by love” from her three children, eight grandchildren and legions of friends. She has, she says, “met my terror of death, I can live with it.”

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