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The Feminine Mystique and Me: 50 years of Intersections

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To be honest, it was difficult for me to write this essay. That is probably because I have not read *The Feminine Mystique*, or at least not all of it. I would no doubt feel guiltier about that except that in this 50th anniversary year of the book's publication, I have read several other feminists' musings on the book containing the same admission. However, writing this piece has prompted me to think about, among other things, why I have never read the book in its entirety.

I didn't read the book in 1963 because at the time I was 17, and busy graduating from high school and beginning college. And, frankly, if I had read the book then, I would probably have dismissed it (in the same annoying way that younger women now sometimes dismiss my messages about sexism) as not being relevant to me, but rather being an issue for my mother and her generation. Liza Donnelly's (2013) comment in *Forbes* online perfectly describes what I imagine my feelings must have been in 1963: "I was already brainwashed by our youth culture to think that what she [Friedan] was talking about was old news . . . I was young, I knew I was not going to be a housewife." In any event, although my mother lived the demographics of Friedan's thesis (she was a stay-at-home mom and my father was the wage earner in our family), the dynamics my parents enacted provided me with a role model for an egalitarian marriage. And, my mother seemed anything but desperate—she acted extremely happy (at least so she seemed whenever I paused from contemplating my own self-centered concerns to look around and try to imagine how anyone else was feeling). In February 2013, Stephanie Coontz wrote in an online essay about Friedan's achievements that in 1963, "most Americans did not yet believe that gender equality was possible or even desirable." But in my home we did, and I certainly did. I knew I was going to have a career, my parents both supported me in that belief, and I didn't see that there would be any obstacles in my way.

In 1973, when I might have been mature enough to process the ideas in Friedan's book, I encountered an obstacle. I had just had a baby, and the authorities at the high school in Iowa where I taught wanted to fire me for being unable to begin the school year on time. They didn't exactly say that a normal woman should renounce all aspirations for work outside the home after beginning a family, but the message seemed pretty clear. I had to hire an attorney, and take a longer maternity leave than I thought I wanted at the time, but I was allowed to return to work in the Spring following my daughter's birth. All this kept me pretty busy thinking about my individual situation, and I didn't turn

to Friedan's 10-year-old work for counsel. It still didn't seem to apply to me. Yet, just as Friedan did, I viewed my problems as personal and I felt alone and isolated in my fight with the school district. It probably didn't help that I was living on a farm and I really was isolated! I was interested to read in an obituary of Friedan that she was fired from a job when she had a child.

But, as a way to achieve some sense of community I was doing just what Friedan advocated, and what her book ushered in—I joined a lot of consciousness-raising groups. I was a member of a women's reading group, but we didn't read *The Feminine Mystique* or even *It Changed My Life* (1976). We were reading other things: Shulamith Firestone and Ursula Le Guin, for instance. I was also a member of a women's health collective and we were busy looking at our uteruses and figuring out how to dismantle male dominated health care. I joined the National Organization for Women (NOW), but I missed Friedan's tenure as president. I marched for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (the ERA) in Illinois (it didn't pass by the way). I was moving from the personal to the political, just as Friedan did.

In 1983 (or somewhere around there) I met Betty Friedan. She came to speak at Iowa State where I was teaching at the time, and as a member of the planning committee for bringing speakers to campus, I had dinner with her and the other committee members before her speech. I have to say I was not impressed. She seemed disengaged with the speech and with us. I had the distinct impression that she had prejudged Iowa State as a place for hicks, and she seemed to be doing the entire gig on autopilot. I was guilty of dismissing her ideas because I didn't like her personality. In *Life So Far* (2000), Friedan says that she has always been a "bad-tempered bitch." When I met her, I didn't give her credit for paving the way for women to have ideas and not necessarily be nice. But, that's an accomplishment too, and one that I am beginning to appreciate more and more.

In 1993, I was concentrating on building my career and teaching college students about the intersections among sex, gender, race, class, and communication. Betty Friedan's work didn't seem too relevant, so I didn't read *The Feminine Mystique* then either. In fact, I'm sure I dismissed it for having all the problems that other feminists have raised about the book: "The complex concept of 'intersectionality', for example, was unfamiliar to Friedan and her generation, whereas today's feminists are much more aware of how race, class, sexuality and gender presentation are woven into the tapestry of problems that women face" (Scott, 2013). Further, I agreed with Coontz (2013) and others who noted that political changes that are sorely needed for a better world are not best achieved through personal choices. Structural changes are needed, and *The Feminine Mystique* does not clearly speak to these. As Cameron Macdonald (2013) notes, when we are completely focused on our private problems, "we lack the energy to push for *public* solutions that would benefit all."

Yet, in an epilogue to *The Feminine Mystique* written a decade after the book was first published, Betty Friedan wrote, "It isn't really possible to make a new pattern of life all by yourself" (p. 381), and she commented that she intended to write a second book

arguing for “a political movement, a social movement like that of the blacks” (p. 382). Rather than write that book, Friedan went to Washington and with several others began NOW. So, perhaps some of the critique of Friedan’s work hasn’t examined it in context, or considered its evolution.

However, I still didn’t read the book. In 2003, I was busy becoming a grandmother and dealing with the realities of gender and aging. And I was realizing that as much as feminism changed the world, there was still much more work to do.

Now, in 2013, I see the inadequacies of *The Feminine Mystique*, but I also am conscious of its strengths. I see the contributions that one woman was able to make, but as Ashley Fetters (2013) noted, I don’t have to consider the book a sacred text and I can look at Friedan’s assertions holistically. I can also see that I, myself, was focused on private problems and concerns throughout the past 50 years. These concerns may have blinded me to insights and resonances from *The Feminine Mystique* that could have benefitted my thinking and aided my political actions. Although Betty Friedan was born in the same year as my parents, she spoke across generations. And, certainly in 2013, I see the generational divide from a different perspective than I did in 1963. I think as Liza Donnelly says, “At the beginning of young adulthood, both men and women feel they know what the real story is. But it takes a certain amount of actual living to fully see. For that reason, women [and men] need to talk to each other and listen across the generations.”

More work remains to be done. More conversations remain to be engaged.

I think I’ll read the book this year.

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