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The Fountain of Age

BETTY
FRIEDAN

AUTHOR OF *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*

Also by Betty Friedan

The Second Stage

It Changed My Life

The Feminine Mystique



The
FOUNTAIN
of
AGE

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*On my kitchen wall in Sag Harbor, where we all get together,
are Hebrew letters from a song celebrating
“from generation to generation.”*

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Miriam, and
my father, Harry, who made a larger life possible for me.*

*And for Daniel, Jonathan, Emily
and Rafael, Caleb, Nataya, David, Isabel, Lára,
Birgitta, and Benjamín,
whose mother and grandmother I am.*

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Author's Note

I started this search in what I thought was merely theoretical excitement when I saw that first clue that didn't fit the accepted truth about women on the brink of age—those women who “didn't have menopause.” I pursued that clue in growing personal dread, because in my fifties I didn't even want to think about age. I was locked in my own denial. I had to break out of my personal denial before I could truly take in and exult over the stories of the surprisingly many women, and also men, whom I found in their sixties, seventies, eighties, and even nineties continuing to grow, and living with vitality a different kind of age.

I am first of all indebted to those strangers and friends who shared their personal truth with me. From Helen and Dick Dudman, Kathleen MacPherson and the Mitchells in Maine to Sam Jaffe, Rita Lowenthal, Madeleine Stoner, and Cecelia Hurwich in California, Edward Bernays in Boston, Ida Davidoff in Connecticut, Earl Arthurs in North Carolina, and all the others—some of whose names have been changed to protect their identities—who surprised me so. As with *The Feminine Mystique*, I made this search into the strange discrepancy between the dread image of age and the vital reality of these women and men simply as a writer on the track of a story, using my own combination of personal truth and hunch (my historical Geiger counter, I sometimes call it), of

journalistic observation and investigative research, drawing on my training as a psychologist and a social scientist to follow clues where they led me in the massive controlled research of gerontology.

I am not myself a gerontologist, of course, but I had powerful guidance from others in this field. First of all, from Robert Butler, my now beloved friend and mentor who was then head of the National Institute on Aging, who wanted to "get me interested in age because," he said, "all the policy and research has been done in terms of men when most of those in age are women." Of course, he can't be held responsible for the way I ran with that.

I could not have spent the years it took me to wade through the data and interview the researchers and over one hundred women and men living their personal age in so many states without the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose then chief, Joe Duffey, said it didn't matter that I wasn't a Ph.D. gerontologist. I am deeply grateful for the even more generous support I got from the Ford Foundation, and most especially my officer there, Terry Saario, and from Jonathan Cole, then head of the Center for Social Science at Columbia University, who gave me an academic home.

I am also grateful to James Birren, then head of the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California, its current chief, Ed Schneider, and to William Alonso of the Center for Population and Development Studies at Harvard, who welcomed me as a senior fellow.

My dear friend Mogen Lazarus aided my search enormously when he and Bob Butler made me part of the team for the Salzburg Seminar on Health, Productivity and Aging and then named me to the LORAN Commission of the Harvard Community Health Plan.

My own dread of age and personal denial became more acute at first as I plunged into the gerontological research. But this dread gave way to growing excitement as I found in many studies implications for a new truth about age that belied its definition only as decline and deterioration from youth—even though the authors of the research themselves may not have spelled out these implications or the dry facts may not have pierced through because they simply did not fit that dread mystique that is responsible for our own and society's fear of age.

The eminent gerontologists who gave me pieces of this different view of age—David Gutmann of Northwestern; Gisela Labouvie-Vief of Michigan; Robert Kastenbaum of Arizona; Myrna Lewis of New York;

Marjorie Kantor of Fordham; Bernice Neugarten and Helena Lopata of Chicago; Marian Diamond of Berkeley; Robert Binstock of Case Western Reserve; Ellen Langer and John Rowe of Harvard; Dr. David Lehr of Miami; Marian Diamond and Margaret Clark of Berkeley; Vern Bengtson, Margaret Gatz, Ruth Weg, Tuck Finch and Leah Buturain of Andrus; Paul Costa of Baltimore; George Maddox and E. Palmore at Duke; Lissy Jarvik of UCLA; Dr. Harold Dupuy; and so many others—may be surprised to be described as an underground. Many of them are card-carrying members of the gerontological establishment. They cannot be blamed for my revolutionary interpretation of their work, though I hope one day they will be celebrated for it.

I hope my personal guides, who shared with me the good and different age they were living at the moment in time when I found them, were able to continue living that good age and to die, as many have since I met them, in the midst of life, though the way things are now in this society I'm afraid they may not have.

I had throughout these ten years the invaluable manuscript birthing help of my beloved assistant, Margaret Peet. I am grateful for the steadfast support of Jim Silberman during the long years when I couldn't finish this book, and I am indebted indeed to my agents, Emilie Jacobson and Peter Ginsberg, of Curtis Brown, and to Alice Mayhew, Eric Steel, and my friend and invaluable manuscript editor, Burton Beals, of Simon & Schuster, for seeing me through to the end.

I must say that as I worked on this book I experienced a delicious sea change, which I hope you will also experience as you read it.

*Sag Harbor, New York
June 1993*

Preface

When my friends threw a surprise party on my sixtieth birthday, I could have killed them all. Their toasts seemed hostile, insisting as they did that I publicly acknowledge reaching sixty, pushing me out of life, as it seemed, out of the race. Professionally, politically, personally, sexually. Distancing me from their fifty-, forty-, thirty-year-old selves. Even my own kids, though they loved me, seemed determined to be part of the torture. I was almost taunting in my response, assuring my friends that they, too, would soon be sixty if they lived that long. But I was depressed for weeks after that birthday party, felt removed from them all. I could not face being sixty.

I thought back to the years that followed the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, when I went through my forties and into my fifties with all the zest and exhilaration of reborn women for whom the movement opened up a whole new future. I forgot about growing older. Age didn't concern me, personally, at all. But, even in those heady years, I did notice something out of the corner of my mind's eye that got me thinking about some change in the aging process that might take place as a result of what was happening to women.

After the book was published, I began looking for new patterns in women who had moved beyond what I had called the feminine mys-

tique—that definition of women solely in terms of their sexual relation to men and their biological role as mothers. When I lectured in Oklahoma, or Texas, or Illinois, I would ask my university hosts to gather those women in town who were combining marriage and motherhood with some profession or serious pursuit beyond the home. The few women they were able to find, back then, with serious jobs involving long-term commitment, were usually older than I. My generation had given up its own ambitions for three or four babies when the men came home from World War II to take our jobs. The younger women, who never had the ambitions which that mystique denied, had abandoned their own educations to put their husbands through engineering or law school, and had acquired even earlier those babies, that suburban house with its appliances, that then defined women's fulfillment. The few "career women" to be found in America thirty years ago—when that feminine mystique had made "career" and "women's rights" dirty words—were likely to be "freaks" who had not married or had children. Women who combined professions with motherhood were not numerous enough in any city to constitute a pattern. They certainly had no sense of pioneering. They had been invisible women in their offices back then, juggling home and children and job so unobtrusively that the boss wouldn't notice.

They were older, in their fifties most of them, but I had noticed something about the way they looked. The tone of their skin, their eyes, and their voices seemed somehow more vibrant, more alive than those of the frustrated younger suburban housewives I had been interviewing for *The Feminine Mystique*. When I asked them, in passing, about their menopause, one after another said, "I didn't have menopause." I got this response from woman after woman in such groups—sure, she was in her fifties, she didn't deny it, but she "never had menopause." I began to wonder if I was dealing with some biological freaks. And then, of course, closer questioning revealed that they had, in fact, stopped menstruating, though they weren't sure exactly when, because they had been so busy with their jobs and their teenage kids. But they simply hadn't suffered any of the dreaded debilitating symptoms that were then expected to accompany that supposed "end of life as a woman."

At that time, if menopause was talked about at all—and like other aspects of female biology, this shameful sexual sickness was better not discussed—the end of a woman's childbearing function was seen as ultimate trauma, the end of her sexual function, her life as woman. She

was told to expect painful, even agonizing, physiological symptoms and depressions that might send her to bed for weeks, even years, sometimes requiring hospitalization. A high proportion of the beds in mental hospitals were in fact filled by women suffering “involutional melancholia,” as it was then called. Mournful books were written about “leftover years to live.” A male gynecologist made millions selling women hormone extracts to keep them “forever female,” artificially inducing that cycle of bleeding each month, though reproduction itself was no longer possible. Only later would it emerge that the hormones which prolonged that bloody illusion of sexual nubility might also hasten death from cancer.

The women I met had taken no such hormones. Their failure to experience traumatic menopause simply didn't fit the conventional or clinical image of the “climacteric” of a woman's life. My inner Geiger counter clicked at that, and I went to see some of the leading gynecologists, as well as psychoanalysts who were considered experts on menopause. In Chicago, the psychoanalyst Theresa Benedek said that while there were great individual differences in the intensity of the symptoms, the depression, and the duration of the mourning, the irreversible loss of the sexual function that defined woman's psyche was for every woman a drastic ending. The death, indeed, of her life as a woman. Her biological “sex role,” which defined her, was finished. Some adjusted to the loss, sublimated in gardening, good works, their grandchildren; others did not.

But in the 1960s, women, myself included, were moving beyond that definition of ourselves solely in terms of our biological sexual role. In the great wave of consciousness-raising that was now taking place from suburban dining tables to church basements, women were taking steps to change their lives—going back to school, getting up the courage to look for jobs, asserting their own personhood. Then the pattern I had seen in those few exceptional women in Oklahoma, Texas, and Illinois in 1964 became a great wave cresting across the nation, as women in their thirties, forties, ~~fifties~~—with young children, or teenagers, or kids already grown—went back to school, became visible in offices, started law school, theological school, businesses of their own, ran for political office, and embarked on serious new directions in church or volunteer work. And I began to wonder: When women grow beyond the limits of their biological role and find new purposes for their lives, could that larger human dimension change the very biology of the aging process?

. . .

About that same time, I got a call from Dr. Robert Butler, then head of the National Institute on Aging. Would I come to see him in Washington? He wanted to get me interested, politically, in the problems of age. Because women are, in fact, the great majority of the old, the problems of age are really women's problems, he said. Yet most of the policies and programs and research on age had been designed by and about and for men.

Well, the problems of age didn't interest me, personally *or* politically. Reading the paper, I skipped stories about nursing home scandals. In the women's movement, age didn't seem to count; we all felt young. But, as Butler spoke, I remembered those changes I had begun to notice in the way women were aging—that vanishing menopause—during the early years of the women's movement. I asked him if that change was being studied, and what it meant. Could women's aging process actually be affected by that change in their definition of themselves? And why were women now living so much longer than men? They hadn't at the turn of the century. But long after women stopped dying in childbirth, even in the last twenty years in America, the gap between men's life expectancy and women's had continued to widen. If the change in women's role could have had a dramatic effect on the aging process, I asked, could some comparable change in the masculine role help men to live longer? Butler said most of the research on aging didn't deal with questions like that.

My Geiger counter was clicking again. I needed some new question to work on myself. Not that I was particularly interested in age. Not that the problems of women which had absorbed my energy and passions for twenty years had all been solved. Not that the women's movement was over. But I now saw it as only the first stage of a revolution—not a war of women against men but an evolutionary breakthrough freeing us from those polarized masculine and feminine sex roles that once might have been important for human survival, specializing women for nurture and men for fighting off marauders and dominating prey, but that were now getting in everyone's way.

Come to think of it, what had really caused the women's movement was the *additional years of human life*. At the turn of the century, women's life expectancy was forty-six; now it was nearly eighty. Our groping sense that we couldn't live all those years in terms of motherhood alone was "the problem that had no name." Realizing that it was