

WOMEN OF WISDOM
TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES



Betty Friedan

By Lynn Gilbert
with Gaylen Moore



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Dedication

*To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.*

— Lynn Gilbert



Betty Friedan in her apartment, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

Betty Friedan

(born 1921, Peoria, Illinois—died 2006, Washington, DC)
launched the contemporary women's liberation movement when her book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, exploded the fifties myth of the happy homemaker. As a writer, lecturer, and organizer, she was the ideologue of a movement that in a few short years changed attitudes and behavior at all levels of society. She was one of the founders of the National Organization for Women and became its first president in 1966

WELL, THEY SAY THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT is the largest movement of social change of the last decades and in some ways it's probably the largest revolution of all time, though it isn't that anyone else has ever meant by revolution. You have to see it in its own terms. I think we're only beginning to see the far-flung implications of the change. Also I think the women's movement is only a step in a larger process of evolution, that it's a stage. It's been happening for a long time.

There was the great first movement for women's rights beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, and the early suffragettes in England and America who fought for the vote, and the early rights; but that movement came to a standstill with the winning of the vote in the United States in 1920, before I was born. It didn't change the lives of women because the rights, while necessary, didn't lead to the kind of changes that are happening now. The movement was aborted, or it was asleep. There was a backlash, which I then gave a name to: the "feminine mystique."

We had to break through the whole image of woman and we had to define ourselves as people; and then we had to begin a process that's still not finished, of restructuring institutions so that women could be people. The essence of the modern woman's movement is equality and the personhood of woman. That's what it is and that's all it is. All the rest of it—all the images of women's lib, the bra-burning, the man-hating, down with marriage, down with motherhood—was an expression of anger based on an ideological mistake. It is not essential. It is not a part of the whole change. The anger was real enough, but sexual politics was not what it was really all about.

The essence of what's been happening and the reason it began, as history books say, with my book *The Feminine Mystique*, was that women had come to a real jumping-off point in their identity. For generations, for centuries, women had been defined primarily in terms of their childbearing role. That was their function in society. It wasn't a mystique. They were passive to their biological destiny. The modern woman's movement did not begin because I or any other witch of Salem somehow seduced the otherwise happy housewives who'd still be having orgasms

waxing the kitchen floor if we hadn't come along. It was an evolutionary necessity that came from the long years of life.

Women's life span is now close to eighty years and women do not die in childbearing years; babies that are born are going to survive and not so many babies need to be born. We've raised the stage of technological development so that we can think of the quality of life, each individual life, not the quantity; so that we do have birth control which is technically, morally, and legally a choice, and work that doesn't depend any longer on brute mastery or strength where women might not be equal to men, but depends increasingly on qualities of mind and spirit where men and women are basically equal in their potential. Then there are those particular intuitions in which women excel and which a machine may never reproduce.

So equality in society was possible perhaps for the first time for the great majority of women; but it was also necessary for a woman to move in society, to define herself as a person because she couldn't live her whole life any longer as a mother. It's as simple as that. In order to do that, she had to break through in consciousness to this definition of herself which, though it's ingrained in the Judeo-Christian tradition, had its last gasp in the post-World War II "feminine mystique."

As I defined it, the mystique defined woman solely in terms of her sexual relation as wife, mother, housewife, server of physical needs, but not as a person defining herself by her own actions in society. Until we had broken through that, we couldn't really see what our real problems or real opportunities were in this era. And once we had done that, the revolution in consciousness and the rest was clearly outlined.

It isn't accidental that the modern women's movement exploded in America because the ideology of the mainstream of the movement is first of all that women are people; and being people, they can and must demand equality of opportunity and their own voice in the decisions of society, human freedom,

human dignity, all the rest that is considered our American birthright. And that's all it was. Everybody had such a hard time thinking this was a movement without an ideology, but the ideology of this movement was no more or no less than the ideology of all human evolution and of American democracy, but applied to women. That's what was unique, and it was applied to us. We did it for ourselves and not abstractly—grocery baskets to the poor for some other race.

All revolutionary movements have been made by intellectuals, the educated. It's nonsense to fool around with any silliness about whether or not the modern women's movement was a white, middle-class movement. Absolutely. It was a white, middle-class movement from the beginning, though it always had blacks in it and it always had to do with the problem of poverty, which for women cuts across class lines. The people who could articulate the philosophy of this movement were people who had education, although for some, the education had come in the labor movement and not in college. That's how movements happen.

The movement was informed a bit—our tactics, our strategy—by the fact that it came on the heels of the civil rights movement. But the uniqueness of this movement comes from women's own experience. It is because we did it for ourselves, and its style and its tactics, its substance, had to do with the concrete dailiness of life as it is lived; life in the kitchen, the bedroom, the house, and the office, and not with abstractions. That's why it changed lives so fast. It came, it dealt with life; it was not abstract. It was concrete.

Now, you say, I am a person; woman is a person; we take ourselves seriously. We must define ourselves, we are forced to, economically, socially. In order to use our human energy to confront a moving society and do its work, we must demand equal opportunity. That was the agenda. I wrote the statement of purpose for the National Organization for Women in 1966. The first sentence of it was: "Full equality for women and full equal partnership with men. Take action to break through the barriers that keep women from participating in the mainstream of society."

It meant, first of all, breaking through sex discrimination as it was, not only in the

law, but in every field and profession in what was, at that point, a man's world. We could see even then, or we saw it more clearly as we went along, that it also had to mean a change, a very basic change in marriage and in the home, which had been defined as the woman's world. Equality for women in society had to mean, not an abolition of the family and the home, and not "down with men."

Now the ideological mistake that crept in and really endangered the women's movement for a while was when the anger exploded. Women had a right to feel anger. You had a right to feel angry if you were pushed down in the office or you were making half the pay the men were getting in the same job, or you were keeping a patient alive as a nurse and teaching three generations of surgeons how to do it, but you didn't have his pay or his status. You had a right to feel angry if you were put down on the pedestal, even in the home. But like all dependent people, the anger was taken out on our own bodies, in self-contempt, self-hatred, self-denigration, and it was taken out inadvertently on husbands and children. It could feel for a while as if man was the enemy. Actually, man was the fellow victim, although the way society was geared, the man had more power. He had the only game in town that seemed to be rewarded.

The younger women who came out of the postwar baby boom and the radical student movement of the sixties had cut their political eye teeth on Marxist class analysis applied to the problems of race. Then they began to be informed by our consciousness, the consciousness of the people who started the modern women's movement, myself and others.

I remember at Berkeley, I tried to get the young radical women interested in this. I went down to Atlanta and tried to get the SNCC women and get black women organizing in the South and they said, "We're not going to fall for that feminist bag." The position of women in SNCC was supposed to be prone, barefoot, and pregnant.

But when the young radical women did begin to become affected by things like the feminine mystique, they began to realize their own situations, you know,

chicks at the mimeograph machine. The young men were just as much male chauvinist pigs as their fathers. Also it was the time that blacks were saying, “Whitey go away,” and “Black is beautiful,” and “separatism.” The women began to make their allusions to women’s liberation and they were laughed at. They walked out and started their own separate women’s lib groups.

So these younger women, without very much experience in women’s lives, began to apply literally the ideology of class warfare and of racial separatism to their situation of women versus men. Their terminology, and that articulated by the extremists of sexual politics, was picked up way beyond its importance by the media. This is a battle of women as an oppressed class against men as the oppressor class. Down with marriage, down with men, down with motherhood, down with sexual relations with men, down with anything that women ever did that was attractive to men. Man was the enemy. They made a whole ideology of that.

The anger was real enough but the ideology was simply a mistake. The situation between women and men is not the same as between worker and boss, it’s not the same as between black and white. Sexual politics demanded that women even repudiate the sexual connection with men so that lesbianism was supposed to be the way to be, the purest form of political statement. It was too literal an analogy, and simply denied and defied actual human biological, sexual, even economic interconnection and interdependence of women and men and human reality.

Of course it was totally wrong politically and we’re still paying the price for it. It would have alienated the great majority of women, who could hardly be asked to give up sex. They may have been defined too much in terms of love and marriage so that became soured for many, but most women in this society still want to marry, and most do.

Women had to get to a definition of people beyond motherhood. To define them solely as mothers was making motherhood into a martyrdom, and yet motherhood

is a reality for most women. Motherhood is a choice now, but most women still, I think, will continue to choose to be mothers although maybe later in their lives than before. Those are the realities.

All this was denied by the sexual politics. It was an ideological mistake and it was also a trivialization of the gut, the essence, of the women's movement. However, even this extremist stuff articulated the anger which most women felt.

The women's movement got so large, it had so much grassroots autonomy, cutting across generations, class, economics, taking hold in the suburbs, small towns, cities, all across the country, that this movement was too big really to be contained even in any one organization. Women who never went near a consciousness-raising group or never were near a NOW chapter, identified and maybe changed their lives. It did that.

There's no question today that women feel differently about themselves than they did twenty years ago, fifty years ago. For the most part, it's been great for women to take themselves seriously as people, to feel some self-respect as people, to feel that they do have some equality even though we know it hasn't been completely achieved; to feel some control over their lives, some ability to act, not just to have to wait passively, some ability even to express their anger when they feel it. It has given women a whole new sense of being alive. We're only beginning to know what we're capable of.

Frankly, I think it is leading toward much better possibilities even of sexual fulfillment for women. I do not believe that masochism is the norm. If a woman can define herself as subject and not just object, we'll begin to see what true sexual liberation can be for a woman. I think that you'll have much better motherhood when she isn't so much of a martyr to it. We're just beginning to see these things.

Okay, over the last ten, fifteen years, we have seen the breakthrough of the women's movement which by now, in its basic sense, includes the majority of

women, and includes not only the feminist organizations like NOW and WEAL and the others, and whatever remains of the radical feminists, but includes the mainstream organizations. The alliance for the Equal Rights Amendment has everybody in it from the League of Women Voters to the Girl Scouts and the Association of Catholic Nuns, the National Council of Churches. There has been a breakthrough in sex discrimination in employment. Women are now in every possible occupation. Women have become a political force. They run for office, they are getting elected, they vote their issues on the political agenda.

Now of course there are literally millions of women living in these terms. It's all changed terribly fast. Political scientists say that there has never been such a change in attitudes and behavior over such a wide stratum of society in such a few short years. But I don't think it's finished yet. I think that the first stage has crested with the breakthrough to woman as a person and that simple breakthrough against sex discrimination. Now we're beginning to see, however, that the first stage is only part of it and we have to turn a corner, a qualitative corner, to the next stage, the second stage of the feminist movement.

We're beginning to have some new ideas about what equality really means. It's pretty clear it cannot mean just a few women getting the jobs that only men had before, or somehow women changing places with the men. It has to mean a lot more than that. One of our first thrusts was for equal opportunity in employment; we knew the equal pay for equal work didn't do the job because so many women didn't even get a chance at those jobs. But now we realize that most women working outside the home are still doing the traditional work that women have done and although this is necessary work in the society, it's not paid what it's worth because women have been doing it. So now we see that equality really has to mean equal pay for work of comparable value.

The goal of the next stage has got to be to make equality livable and workable. That means that there has to be a restructuring of institutions. Not the abolition of the home and the family. That is not what this means. But there's got to be a restructuring of the home and the family because it's not any longer based on the woman as the subservient, unequal housewife. Both in the couple are earning,

both should have options to take leaves, or go to part-time schedules, when children are little so the woman is no longer the automatic, unpaid server in the home. But the home is still there and needs to be taken care of. Now that means not only a whole new approach to parenting, but new kinds of designs of houses, apartments, communities, new services, new appliances, a restructuring of work; because work in all the professions, all the hours of internships and residencies, is structured in terms of men and men's lives at a time when they had wives to take care of all the concrete details of life.

What we need are a whole set of options in child care, not just government funding, but preschool, after-school, in the home, funded or sponsored by unions, by industries, for profit, not for profit. Combinations of public funding, private funding, tax incentives for business to have child-care programs, tax credit for each child, whatever plans would enable one parent to stay home for a few years to concentrate on the child and be compensated for that financially, or having it to spend on child care, or take tax credit for it, plus a sliding scale with ability to pay.

We're not going to get the restructuring, the flexitime and all the rest, in terms of women alone. We don't have the power to get it. You'll have men with new demands for it, too. Men in their young years are going to be expected increasingly to share the parenting and the family responsibility. You're beginning to see men rebel, the quieter value revolution. They'll say, "I'm not going to live in terms of the rat race alone. I'm not going to live in terms of a definition of masculinity that makes me suppress my feelings and defines me as just an instrument, as a breadwinner, and makes me have strokes and heart attacks at age forty-five." You're seeing evidence of this all over the place. So you find that young men, and older men, too, have some interest in flexitime where they won't be defined solely by the linear job career. This change coincides with changes in technology and those brought about by the energy crisis.

The changes that men are going to make are less simple because they won't come from anger. They don't have the same simple reason for anger that the women did. But if we don't move on to the second stage, we could get aborted just like the first wave of feminism. I don't think that the women's movement as such is going

to be the main vehicle for the next stage of change. It may be, of necessity, still too much locked into the first agenda which isn't complete yet. We have to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed. But there are also too many women who've taken leadership in the women's movement who are still in a phase of reaction. It makes them uneasy when I talk about the family.

Young women today are showing a lot more signs of stress because they have to make decisions they never had to make before. It used to be that a young woman only had to get married. She had to find a man who would take care of her for the rest of her life. Now she has to decide, What am I going to do professionally? She still has the question of marriage and the choice of having children. With a 40 percent divorce rate, which may have affected their mothers or people they know, more and more women know in their gut that they can't look to marriage for their security. They've got to be able to earn, take care of themselves.

Also, they've been given a chance to do some work that is relatively rewarding, to go into the professions. How are they going to combine this with motherhood? They're afraid to have kids. They postpone this choice or they say, I don't want to have kids, or they have agonizing conflicts about it. You're finding women today who are living this dilemma. They don't have a free choice, a good choice yet, because to have both a career and children they have to be superwomen.

If too many women make these judgments—against marriage, against motherhood—and they look for their security and fulfillment in careers, they're going to wake up ten years from now lonely, feeling cheated, and women are going to learn what men have always known, that work is work, not play. There's a lot of drudgery to it, and there's some reward in it, but it's not all that good for men when they live for work alone. So the woman who has the strength to say no to that, plus the man who can say no to that, they will be the force for the next stage of change.

To abolish the family is not the answer. We have to come to terms with the family. There's a whole evolution of the family, no longer based on women as housewives, no longer even based on children. People need the family or its

equivalent. It will take new shape. The next stage, the restructuring of work, the restructuring of family, the values revolution, will be carried out by women and men in some new alliance. And the ideology of American democracy will still be the ideology of the second stage—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I don't see anything in the ideology of America that doesn't lead to this. I think that we are on the front edge of society here.

In the last year that I've been talking in these terms, I feel that young women feel a great relief. You see it would be terrible if we defined ourselves in such narrow ways that these impulses, which are very powerful in women, are denied because feminism tells them that somehow they're going to have to fulfill themselves, as opposed to having children or as opposed to marriage.

In this era of fast change in society, I think we will see an increasing value put on commitment, on long-term intimacy. We will realize its value so that "swinging" or "open marriage"—some of the things that happened as people were breaking out of a repressive sexuality and marriage—we'll look back on as cheap epiphenomena. It isn't the major thrust of the future. People want intimacy, they really do. They want structure in their lives; they want stability; they want family or the equivalent. On the other hand, it's got to be involved with reality, sharing in a new way the economic burdens, sharing in a new way the home and the family and the child-rearing or interests beyond it.

Of course it all begins with personal truths. That's what I keep cautioning. It begins with life, comes from life, and has to come back to life. I didn't know I was angry when I wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. I had no ideology for anger. It was much later, when I was living the life of the eminine mystique, that I realized that the image I called "the feminine mystique"—and was even celebrating in the articles I was writing for women's magazines—didn't explain certain things I was beginning to hear from other women, what I called the problem that has no name. That's when I wrote my new book.

How I was able to figure that out came from everything that ever happened to me in my life, beginning with my very good education which I had never

used adequately. I went to Smith College and I graduated summa cum laude in psychology. I got a psychology fellowship at Berkeley and then I won the biggest science fellowship that's given to go straight through to my Ph.D. It was the beginning of World War II and all the men were going to war. I was going out with a guy who said, "Well, I'll never win a scholarship like that. It's all over." So I didn't take the fellowship. Somehow I thought if I took it I'd be a spinster. It was ridiculous, but that was the image.

I came to New York and I got a job on a newspaper. I got married—it wasn't the same guy—and when I got pregnant with my second child, they fired me. I was indignant, but I couldn't take it to the Newspaper Guild because there was no word for sex discrimination. Our contract provided for maternity leave and I got it the first time I was pregnant, but my leaving disrupted everything in the office, it cut down the staff. So the second time, they fired me.

After World War II, the career woman was an unattractive thing to be. Women would be fulfilled as housewives if only their education didn't make them neurotic, and unable to adjust to their role as women. I decided I was going to be a fulfilled woman, a mother and wife. Then I saw that it wasn't the education that made women neurotic. There was something wrong with the role as it was defined.

The shores are strewn with the casualties of the feminine mystique. They did give up their own education to put their husbands through college, and then, maybe against their own wishes, ten or fifteen years later, they were left in the lurch by divorce. The strongest were able to cope more or less well, but it wasn't that easy for a woman of forty-five or fifty to move ahead in a profession and make a new life for herself and her children or herself alone. Others succumbed to alcoholism and suicide. I think of the women that were young housewives with me, mothers with me, my social group then. One was a suicide, one was a near-suicide, one is dead of alcoholism. One, who made a very extreme feminine mystique move away from her career, was able to get back in.

And I have my scars. I haven't married again. I've been divorced ten years;

I'm lonely at times, and I think I would like to get married again. But I haven't and I haven't probably for two reasons. One is, no matter what I think, I think probably there is a fear in me. It was very hard for me to get out of my marriage. My marriage was very destructive. It was much easier for me to go "Rah! Rah!" with the movement than it was to change my own life personally. I may still have a fear that I would get myself back into a terrible situation. And secondly, I have put myself into the situation somehow, willy-nilly, of being the Joan of Arc of the women's movement. That's a little threatening for a man. So in that sense I've paid some price, I suppose, for what I've done.

On the other hand, I've had a good and rich life, not just my public life which has been exciting. It's exciting to have been a part of all this and to have had a role in it. My frivolous life has been fun, too. Feminism should not be all grim. And my three kids are great. Who knows? They may think I would have been a better mother if it hadn't been for the women's movement, but I don't think so. The way that you can have children now, when you've already started on your work and know what you can do, you are not subject to the guilts that women in my generation were. That was the worst, the guilts, the conflicts, the leaning over backwards against them. That put negative valences on one's own enjoyment of motherhood. It's such a short period. I wish that in the period when they were little, I wish I'd felt free to concentrate on them more. But when you're under the aegis of the feminine mystique, there was the rebellion; and then to do anything at all, you're going against the stream of society and you have your own guilts about what you're doing.

I learned as a psychologist and as a reporter, first, to really get the story, and second, to really look at your own experience and other people's experience; not through the narrow rubrics, not canned, look afresh, to spell your own name, to test it with experience, and if it doesn't fit the image, the image is wrong. You're never finished.

Today I see the same contradiction, in a way, between what almost becomes "the feminine mystique" if we get locked into the reaction, the sexual politics of the women's movement and the reality of women's lives, including my own. Don't

forget that my own agony that led me to write *The Feminine Mystique* had to do with the mistaken choice: either/or. When I see us heading toward it again, when I see us denying the basic needs of women that do have to do with love and men and children, it denies a part of me, it denies a part of my personhood and what I am as a woman. I will not deny all that I am.

“It changed my life.” That’s what women say about the women’s movement, “It changed my life, it changed my whole life.” When they said it in the beginning, they meant the book *The Feminine Mystique*. Now they mean the whole women’s movement. It did change everybody’s lives, including my own. But I don’t want there to be any danger this time of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What I’m saying now is really unfinished. Where it seemed in the first stage that self-fulfillment for women was opposed to the family, in the second stage I think because the evolution of the family is based on the strengthened self and autonomy of women, they are not opposed. I do not think you can see a full celebration of the personhood of woman if you divorce the woman from the family. But the strengthening of the family is made possible by the new autonomy of women.

Some may think I’m a traitor for talking this way; some think I’m out ahead again.



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