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## Reflections on the Feminine Mystique

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In 1963, the year that *The Feminine Mystique* was published, I had just started high school and I was pretty much oblivious to feminism. I don't think I'd ever heard the word and I'm certain I didn't know about the book or its author. It was a time when many high school history books summed up First Wave feminism with one sentence . . . *in 1920, Congress passed the 19th Amendment, giving American women the right to vote.*

I was Catholic, attending Catholic school and my world was largely circumscribed by what best can be described as a “Catholic compound”: church, convent, rectory, grade school, and high school. We spent a lot of time in church, a place where females were not seen in the altar area except to clean it. Women's presence during worship services was through statues and other depictions of female saints as well as Mary—Virgin Mother, Queen of Heaven, Madonna. Girls were instructed to emulate her . . . virginal, humble, obedient, and faithful. Again, this was not promising as a basis for addressing “the problem that has no name.”

On the other hand, I was smart. And I was surrounded by other smart girls as well as intelligent, accomplished women, many of them nuns. And nuns were (are) women who did not define themselves by marriage or motherhood or home-making. In high school I was an honors student and became active in speech competitions, both as a debater and an orator. I was good. In oratory, I competed against boys and often won. In debate, however, I was usually restricted to competing against girls since my partner was also female. As with competitive sports, these competitions were not only segregated but the girls' teams were considered the lesser form of being.

But it was in this cocooned existence that cracks of awareness began to form. Two particular instances stand out. The first was when my boyfriend broke up with me because, in a rare tournament that allowed all teams to compete against one another, my partner and I beat him and his partner. “You can't seriously mean that you're ending our relationship over a stupid trophy,” I sobbed. “Yes,” he said incredulously, as though the seriousness of my infraction should be self-evident. The second instance was when I won some sort of citizenship award from the city's Rotary Club. I distinctly remember being the only female in the room, surrounded by men who were smoking and making

bad jokes. “Why aren’t women allowed into this organization,” I wondered, “these people do not seem inherently superior to me.” Still . . . no thoughts of Betty Friedan.

Actually, I didn’t encounter *The Feminine Mystique* until graduate school. By that time, the argument that motherhood and home-making weren’t always sufficient fulfillment was not a revelation to me. But reading the book helped me nevertheless. For one thing, it gave me new insight into my mother. Growing up, my sister, brothers, and I were vaguely aware that there was always an undercurrent of anger in her. Although she threw herself into intensive home-making activities—making her own draperies, baking homemade bread, recovering furniture, sewing prom dresses—there seemed as much resentment as joy in these efforts. And she sometimes expressed frustration that we loved our father as much as her even though, as a traveling salesman, “all he did was show up.” It hadn’t occurred to me until reading Friedan that my mother may have been dealing with deep disappointment. She had been a top student throughout her school years and, eventually, a highly respected nurse. Perhaps home-making and childcare weren’t enough for her. And, perhaps, she couldn’t admit that even to herself.

I know that Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique* have been criticized for many things, including her concentration on privileged white women. And I remembered this when I heard similar critiques regarding the first overtly feminist films of the 1970s: *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (Perry, 1970) and *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky, 1978). These observations are certainly valid. But, for me, there was a value in seeing that even those very privileged women could not depend on their pedestal position to be fulfilled. In my undergraduate years at Northwestern University, I had been surrounded by prototypes of these characters. Young women who, despite the era’s involvement with civil rights, anti-war, and women’s liberation struggles, seemed to regard their wardrobes and marrying into money as their primary foci. It was sometimes intimidating. However, in subsequent years as a single woman, Friedan’s analysis helped me to remember that neither domesticity nor dependency, however comfortable, were the keys.

Friedan’s observations helped me yet again when, well into the 1980s, I was in love with someone who was deciding between commitment to me or the Roman Catholic priesthood. One weekend, he left with other seminarians on retreat. I resented the fact that he was going to spend the entire weekend celebrating a life option that was not open to me, either as a fellow participant (women cannot be ordained priests in the Roman Catholic Church) or as a partner. In other words, he could create a meaningful life for himself that was not contingent on marriage. Moreover, he would be greatly supported by family, friends, and institutions for doing so. I, on the other hand, was feeling the pressure of being in my 30s and still unmarried. It hit me that I needed to make sense of my life in a way that wasn’t contingent on “a man.” And I did.

I eventually married that would-be seminarian, became a mother, and have been known to arrange flowers and bake cookies. All of this has made me very happy. But this is not to say that these things are the total sum of my life’s meaning. In reflecting on Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, I cannot help but think of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “A

Solitude of Self” given as an address to Congress in 1892. In it, she offers the following observation:

No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and, for safety in an emergency, they must know something of the laws of navigation. To guide our own craft, we must be captain, pilot, engineer; with chart and compass to stand at the wheel. . . . It matters not whether the solitary voyager is man or woman; nature, having endowed them both equally, leaves them to their own skill and judgment in the hour of danger, and, if not equal to the occasion, alike they perish.

Given Stanton’s life’s work, it is difficult to believe that she was only concerned with emergency situations or physical death. She meant that, however much we value our bonds to one another, we each must take responsibility for the fullness of our lives and recognize that this fullness has a broad horizon. I find that my own life course attests to the wisdom that both Stanton and Freidan so powerfully expressed. Thanks, Elizabeth. Thanks, Betty.

## References

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