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"Give me a place to stand and I will take you somewhere else."

Erma Bombeck and Betty Friedan – Two Sides of the Same Coin

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On an October day in 1964, a friend invited Erma to join her at a talk to be given in Dayton by Betty Friedan, the author of a new best-selling book: *The Feminine Mystique*. Just to put things in perspective, at this point Erma was not yet writing a humor column. She had three kids ages 11, 9, and 6. She felt buried in responsibilities while beginning to raise questions about whether packing school lunches again, doing laundry again, cleaning the house again, planning dinner again, attending another PTA meeting, driving another car pool, and managing yet another kid's daily drama was the peak of what she was supposed to live for.

Erma describes the restive state she and her fellow housewives inhabited when they went to hear Betty Friedan speak. "What if all my friends get jobs outside of their homes and I get stuck with all their kids who throw up and have to be picked up at school...? What if my husband outgrows me mentally and starts to shop for someone who has read something more current than a steam iron warranty?" They hadn't read *The Feminine Mystique* yet, but they had heard enough about it to have an inkling that Friedan would meet them where they were, would give them a sense of being heard and understood.

And yet, when Friedan spoke, instead of feeling acknowledged for once, Erma and her friends felt chastised "like we were back in grade school and got caught chewing gum before we could swallow it." Friedan challenged them: "This is not funny... This is a battle to emancipate women!... Marriage and motherhood are essential parts of life, but not the whole of it... This is a sexist society. You are not using your God-given abilities to their potential." Betty Friedan was angry. The Midwest audience she spoke to was not ready for anger.

Erma writes about her confusion, "Maybe I felt threatened and frightened by the changes she proposed... I had a life going here. Maybe it needed work, but I had a husband and three kids that I loved, and I wasn't going to discard it... But I liked the part about using your God-given potential. I wondered if I had any."

Erma read *Mystique* cover to cover. In the end she agreed with Friedan's analysis. But she differed in her way of dealing with it. Betty pointed out that housewives have no one to represent what the housewife contends with day after day, no one to stand up for them, no leader, no heroine; Erma concurred. But while Betty wanted the world to take the women's movement seriously; Erma felt laughter was essential. This gave her the impetus she needed. Over the next couple of weeks, she assembled a set of sample articles about life in the suburbs, describing exactly what wasn't being addressed, but with tongue planted firmly in cheek. She took the sample articles in to the Kettering Oakwood Times, a local weekly, and proposed writing a regular column. The rest is history. In a year she was a syndicated humorist, and her popularity grew from there. Meanwhile, *The Feminine Mystique* became a best seller, with over one million copies sold in its first year.

Both Friedan and Bombeck brought women's issues to light. Erma became the housewife heroine that Betty said didn't exist. Yet perhaps, when we hold our sides at Erma Bombeck's drolleries, we should give a nod of thanks to the unrest articulated and fomented by Betty Friedan.