

# BUSINESSWOMAN

## Gloria Steinem's Longer View

— By Leslie Lewis

**D**ECADES FLY. THE WOMAN CELEBRATED FOR accidentally declaring, “This is what 40 looks like. We’ve been lying for so long, who would know?” is no longer 40, no longer 50, no longer 60, but is now 70 years old.

If you think Gloria Steinem, who co-founded *Ms. Magazine* in 1971, might have slowed down, think again. She racks up frequent flyer miles at an astounding pace and is more radical than ever. As she laughingly says, “I think if I weren’t getting older and more radical, Bush would be enough to help. Bush can accomplish that for us at any age.”

While defeating Bush has been a recent focus, Steinem continues, as she has for the past 35 years, to travel nationally and internationally and speak with a calm voice of reason about gender, racial and other civil inequity issues.

After Steinem’s unintentional proclamation about what 40 looks like and about collective societal “pressure to ‘pass’ by lying about one’s age,” she received so many words of thanks and so many observations from other women facing age bias that she began to truly realize the profundity and dimension of age oppression.

In her inspiring essay “Doing Sixty,” Steinem notes that for women, especially, “Most of our social value ended at 50 or so, when our youth-related powers of sexuality, childbearing and hard work came to an end — at least, by the standards of a culture that assigns such roles.

“We’ve allowed a youth-centered culture to leave us so estranged from our future selves that, when asked about the years beyond 50, 60 or 70 — all part of the average human life span, providing we can escape hunger, violence and other epidemics — many people can see only a blank screen, or one on which they project fear of disease and dependency.” Steinem says this “incomplete social map” makes the last third of life unknown territory. “Only a wave of noisy feminists has made us aware of its limits by going public with experiences that were once beyond its edge.”

During the interview for this article, Steinem said she thinks Americans need to consider how much our ideas of aging are a function of the culture we live in. She points to a study done by the World Health Organization of a wide variety of about 100 countries and cultures.

“It was a study of menopause, which one would think of as a commonly shared physical event, but it is experienced very differently in different cultures,” said Steinem. “The one thing that seems to happen is that women’s status changes at that point, but in countries where women go from less freedom to more



*Gloria Steinem's 65th birthday celebration five years ago was also a benefit for the Ms. Foundation for Women.*

freedom, they experience or report many fewer symptoms than in countries like ours where it is the other way around — where you are valued more in youth and less in age.

“I suspect that we don’t know really what aging is,” Steinem considered, “because we penalize it, we don’t understand what it could be. Just for everyone to tell their ages would be a form of ‘coming out’ that would be very helpful.”

As she noted in “Doing Sixty,” “If all the women now pressured to lie were to tell

their ages, our ideas of what 55 or 60 or 75 looks like would change overnight — and even doctors might learn a thing or two. More important, women telling the truth without fear would be a joyous ‘coming out.’ Yet, as with lesbian women and gay men who have given the culture that phrase as a paradigm of honesty, only people who freely choose to ‘come out’ can diminish the fear others feel.”

So what of Steinem’s own experiences of aging? Hard as it may be to believe, she has

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become more radical with age. In "Doing Sixty," she quoted one of her own essays in which she speaks of this experience and even states why she believes it is common for older women to be more radical than young women.

"I realized that most women in their teens and 20s hadn't yet experienced one or more of the great radicalizing events of a woman's life: marrying and discovering it isn't yet an equal (or even nonviolent) institution; getting into the paid labor force and experiencing its limits, from the corporate 'glass ceiling' to the 'sticky floor' of the pink-collar ghetto; having children and finding out who takes care of them and who doesn't; and, finally, aging, still the most impoverishing event for women of every race, and so potentially, the most radicalizing.

"To put it another way, if young women have a problem, it's only that they think there's no problem." Steinem quickly added that she, herself, was part of this group in her 20s and she commends the many

organizations of young women active on their own behalf as remarkable.

In "Doing Sixty," Steinem described turning 50 as "leaving a much-loved and familiar country" and turning 60 "as arriving at the border of a new one" in which she would look forward to "trading moderation for excess, defiance for openness, and planning for the unknown." Steinem stated that one of the benefits of this longer view was that she has always had two or more tracks running in her head.

"The pleasurable one was thinking forward to some future scene, imagining what should be, planning on the edge of fantasy. The other played underneath with all too realistic fragments of what I should have done. There it was in perfect microcosm, the past and future coming together to squeeze out the present — which is the only time in which we can be fully alive.

"The blessing of what I think of as the last third or more of life (since I plan to reach a

hundred) is that these past and future tracks have gradually dimmed until they are rarely heard. More and more, there is only the full, glorious, alive-in-the-moment, don't give-a-damn yet caring-for-everything sense of right now."

When asked how turning 70 has been unlike turning 50 or 60, Steinem's answer was stunning in its simplistic universality. "It is different because it has a ring of mortality — so it has a big message of 'stop wasting time'."

While it is difficult to believe that Steinem ever fritters away time, the recent deaths of friends and colleagues including writer and scholar Carolyn Heilbrun and Margaret Sloan-Hunter, an early editor of *Ms. Magazine* and a friend with whom Steinem lectured extensively on sexism and racism, have no doubt profoundly affected her.

Of the recent death of her husband, activist David Bale, Steinem says, "Both his presence in my life and his absence resulted in a shift in the way I

see other people and what I assume about relationships."

What does Steinem still wish to accomplish? In the introduction to *Moving Beyond Words*, she indicated that the many years she spent more absorbed in activism than writing left her "with an unwritten book in every toe, elbow, and tooth..."

Ten years later, she still feels the same, "and with a greater sense of urgency because time is shorter. It mostly has to do with writing, though there are other things, like living with elephants." [For the details on her empathy and affinity with elephants, see her essay in her friend Marlo Thomas' book, *The Right Words at the Right Time.*]

Steinem hopes to "live to the year 2030, and see what this country will be like when one in four women is 65 or over — as is one in five of the whole population." May we all live to see the day when this glorious noisy feminist says to some young 84-year-old reporter, "I am proud to say this is what 107 looks like." ❀